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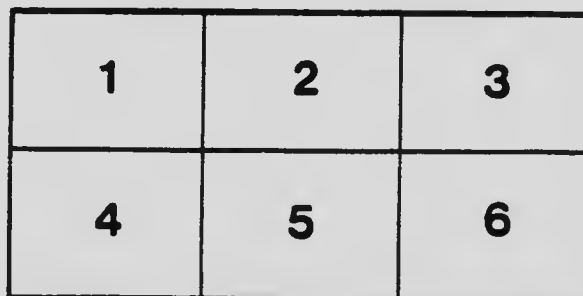
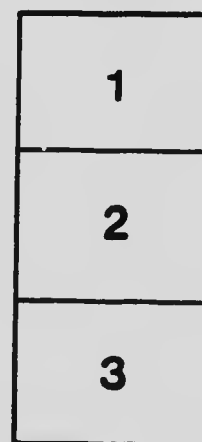
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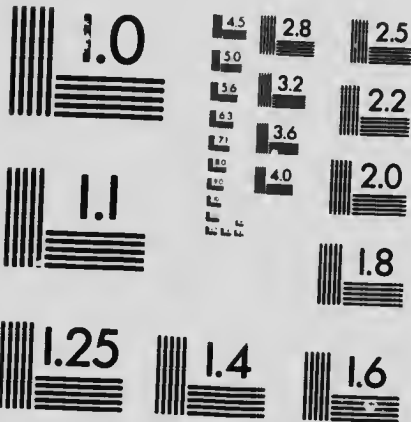
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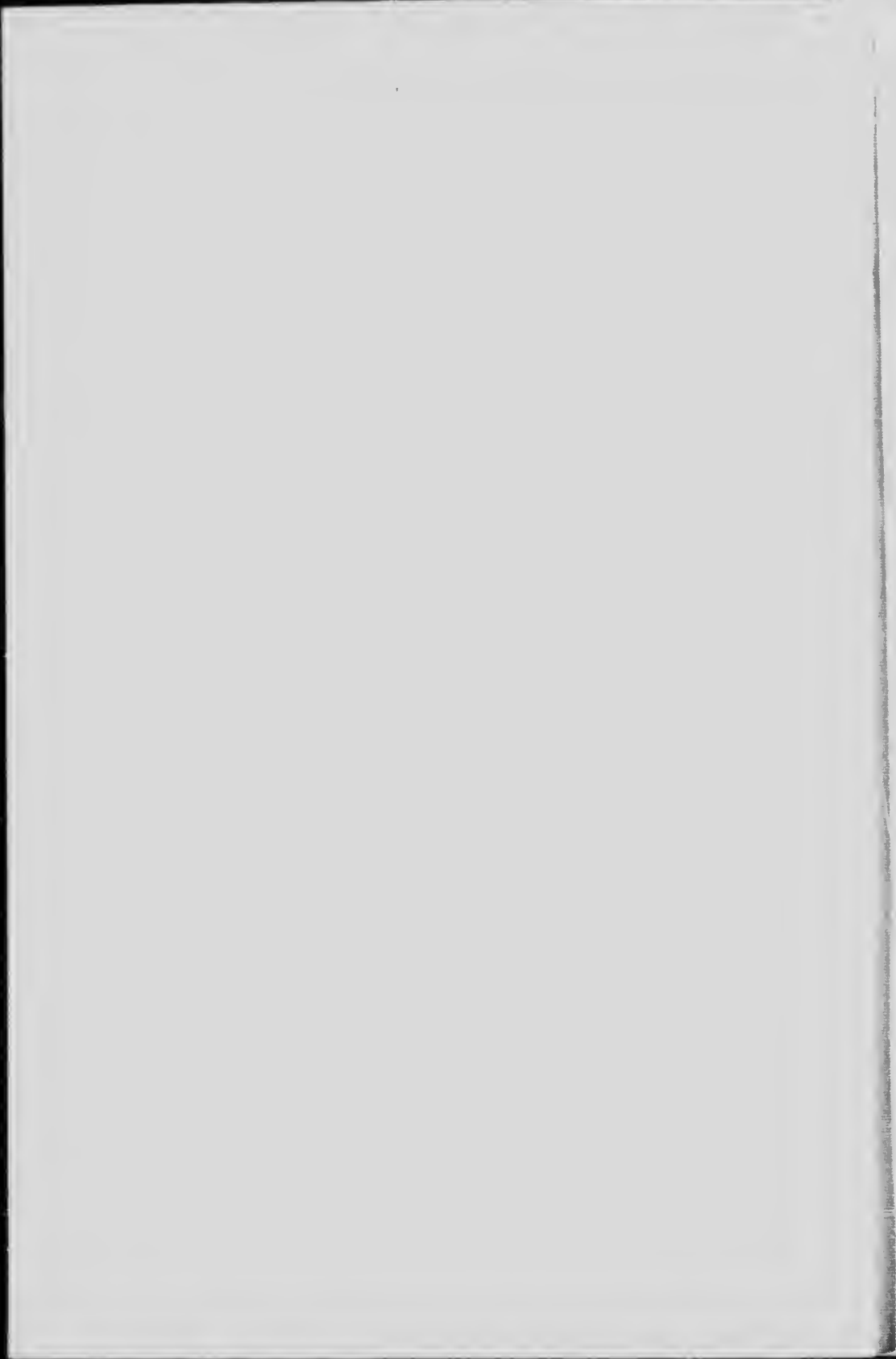
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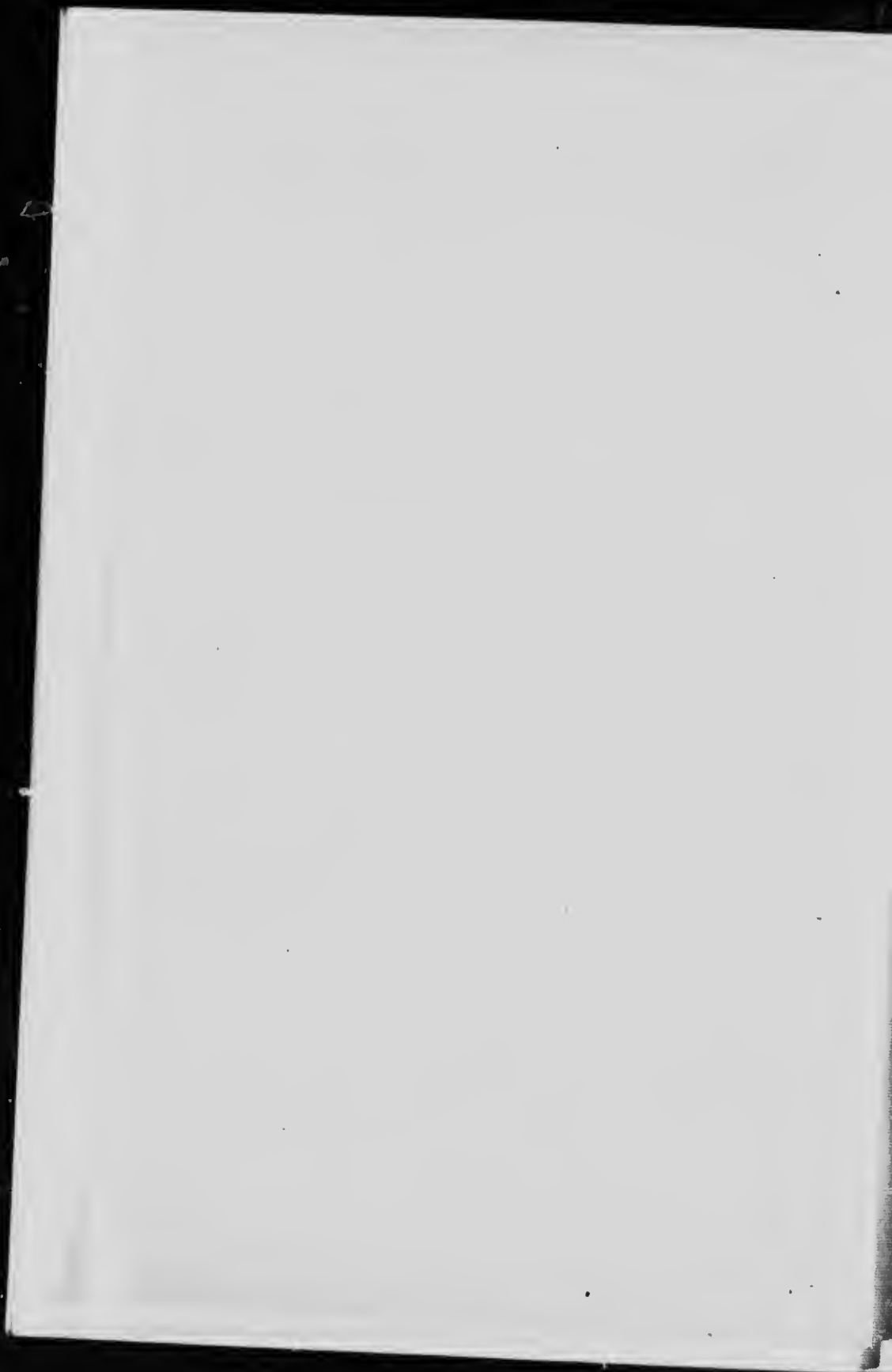
Bonnie May

By
Louis Dodge

Illustrations by
Reginald Birch

A strolling player comes

Toronto
George J. McLeod
Publishers Limited



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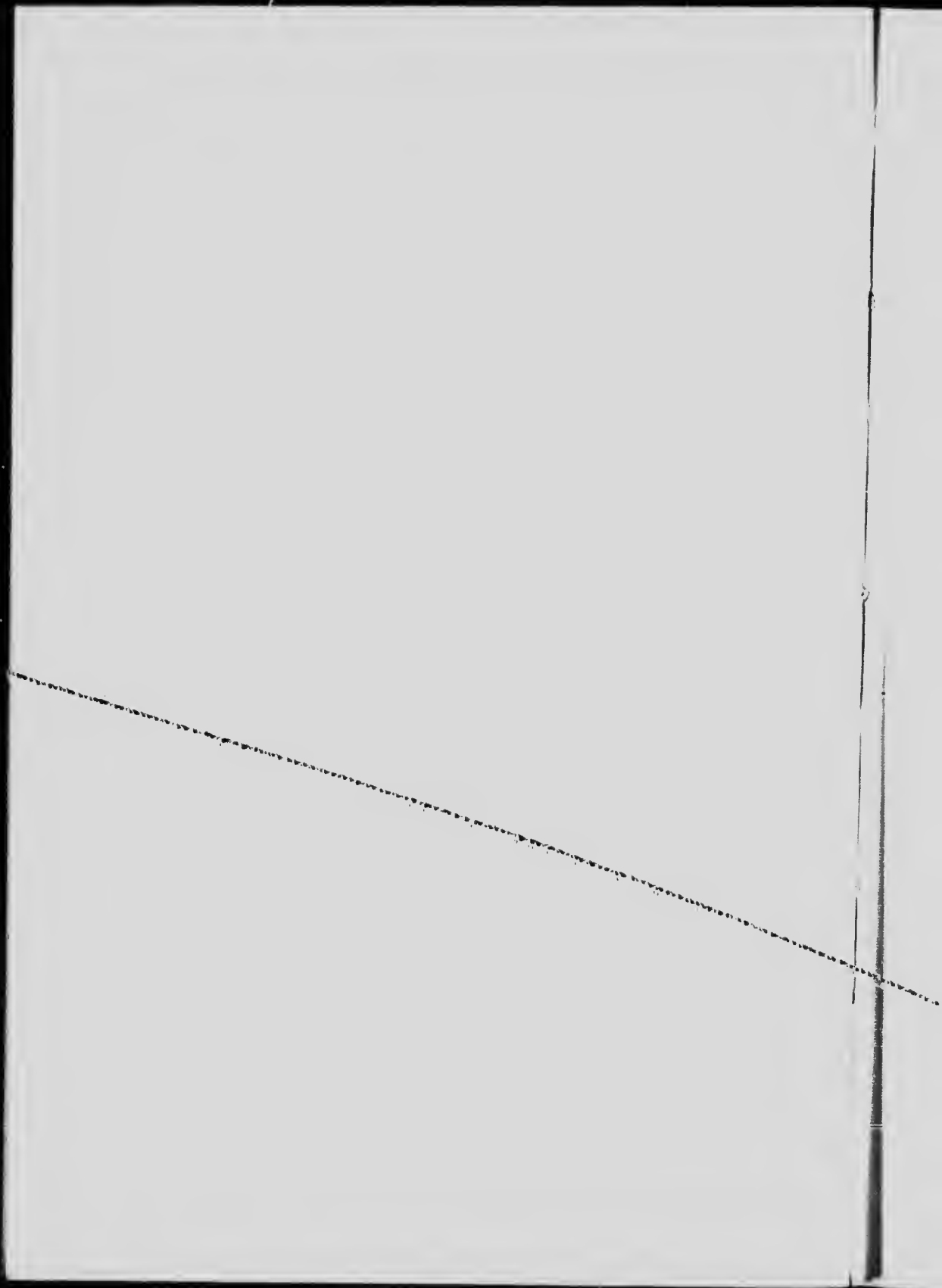
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TO
THE LITTLE NEW ENGLAND GIRL
WHO (IN COMPANY WITH HER MOTHER)
MADE FRIENDS WITH AN AMERICAN SOLDIER
ON A JUNE DAY IN 1898
IN THE MARKET-PLACE IN HONOLULU
AND PROMISED
"I SHALL NEVER FORGET YOU"



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Bonnie May

*Only women understand children thoroughly,
but if a mere man keeps very quiet and
humbles himself properly, and refrains from
talking down to his superiors, children will
sometimes be good to him and let him see what
they think about the world.*

RUDYARD KIPLING.

Bonnie May

CHAPTER I

THE INTRUSION OF AN ACTRESS

SOMEWHERE up in the gallery an usher opened a window. Instantly a shaft of sunlight pierced the dark interior of the theatre. It created a mote-filled aerial avenue across a vast space and came to an end in a balcony box.

As if it were part of a general theatrical scheme it served as a search-light and brought into brilliant relief the upper part of a child's body. There were blue eyes made lustrous by dark lashes; hair the color of goldenrod, which fell forward over one shoulder and formed a kind of radiant vehicle above for the support of a butterfly of blue ribbon. There were delicate red lips, slightly parted.

The child leaned forward in her place and rested her elbows on the box railing. Her chin nestled in a little crotch, formed by her two hands. She would have resembled one of Rubens's cherubs, if Rubens hadn't conceived his cherubs on quite such a vulgar plane.

It was so that Baron saw her during a brief interval. Then the window up in the gallery was closed, and darkness reigned in the theatre again

Bonnie May

The child disappeared as Marguerite always disappears before Faust has obtained more than a seductive glimpse of her.

Baron wondered who she was. She was so close to him that he could have touched her. He wondered how she could have slipped into the box without his seeing or hearing her. The lights had been on when he took his seat, and at that time he had occupied the box alone. She must have crept in with the cautiousness of a kitten; or perhaps she had come under cover of the noise of applause.

Then he forgot her. All sorts of people were likely to come into a playhouse during a matinée performance, he reflected.

Dawn was merging into day—in the play. The purple of a make-believe sky turned to lavender, and to pink. The long, horizontal streaks of color faded, and in the stronger light now turned on the stage a gypsy woman who seemed to have been sleeping under a hedge came into view—a young creature, who patted back a yawn which distorted her pretty mouth. Other persons of the drama appeared.

Baron succumbed to the hypnotic power of the theatre: to the beguiling illusions of the stage, with its beautiful voices; the relaxed musicians, unobtrusively disinterested; the dark, indistinct rows of alert forms down in the parquet. Despite what he was pleased to believe was a distinguished indifference in his manner, he was passionately fond of plays, amazingly susceptible to their appeal.

The Intrusion of an Actress

The act ended; light flooded the theatre. Baron's glance again fell upon the intruder who had come to share his box with him. The child really might have been mistaken for an exquisite bit of architectural ornamentation, if she had been placed in a niche in the big proscenium arch. Color and pose and outline all suggested the idea. But now her bearing changed. As she had been absorbed in the meaning of the play, now she became equally interested in the audience, rising in long rows from parquetry to gallery. She looked almost aggressively from point to point, with a lack of self-consciousness that was quite remarkable.

People in the audience were noticing her, too; and Baron felt suddenly resentful at being so conspicuously perched before hundreds of eyes, in company with a child he knew nothing about.

She appeared to have scrutinized "the house" to her satisfaction. Then she turned as if she were slightly bored, and gazed with perfect frankness into Baron's eyes.

"Sold out," she said, as if she were gratified.

Baron did not clearly grasp the fact that she was referring to "the house." A question as to her age occurred to him, but this he could not answer. She must be absurdly young—a baby; yet he noted that she had gained command of a glance that was almost maturely searching and complacent. She was not the least bit agitated.

When, presently, she stood up on her chair to

Bonnie May

obtain a general view of the audience, Baron frowned. She was really a brazen little thing, he reflected, despite her angelic prettiness. And he had a swift fear that she might fall. Looking at her uneasily, he realized now that she was quite tawdrily dressed.

His first impression of her had been one of beauty unmarred. (He had not seen immediately that the blue butterfly which rode jauntily on her crown was soiled.) Now a closer inspection discovered a fantastic little dress which might have been designed for a fancy ball—and it was quite old, and almost shabby. Yet its gay colors, not wholly faded, harmonized with some indefinable quality in the little creature, and the whole garment derived a grace from its wearer which really amounted to a kind of elfish distinction.

She spoke again presently, and now Baron was struck by the quality of her voice. It was rather full for a little girl's voice—not the affected pipe of the average vain and pretty child. There was an oddly frank, comrade-like quality in it.

“Do you know what I've got a notion to do?” she inquired.

Baron withdrew farther within himself. “I couldn't possibly guess,” he responded. He shook his head faintly, to indicate indifference. She leaned so far over the edge of the box that he feared again for her safety.

“I think you might possibly fall,” he said. “Would you mind sitting down?”

The Intrusion of an Actress

She did as he suggested with a prompt and sweet spirit of obedience. "I'm afraid I was careless," she said. Then, looking over more guardedly, she added: "I've got a notion to drop my programme down on that old duck's bald head."

Baron looked down into the parquet. An elderly gentleman, conspicuously bald-headed, sat just beneath them. Something about the shining dome was almost comical. Yet he turned to the child coldly. He marvelled that he had not detected a pert or self-conscious expression of countenance to accompany the words she had spoken. But she was looking into his eyes quite earnestly.

He turned his face away from her for an instant, and then, with an air of having worked out a problem——

"I don't believe I would," he said.

"It might frighten him?" she suggested.

"Not that. He might not think it very polite."

She looked at him studiously a little, her earnest eyes seeming to search his soul. Then she ventured upon a story:

"I got on a street-car with Miss Barry to-day, and we sat down on a seat with a fat woman; and, believe me, the big thing nearly squeezed the gizzard out of me."

Her eyes grew wide with excitement as she achieved the climax. She waited for his comment.

His eyelids quivered slightly. He decided to pay no more attention to her, despite her prettiness.

Bonnie May

What language! He stared resolutely at his programme a full minute. But he could not shake off the influence of her steady gaze. "I think you must be exaggerating," he said finally, with mild irritation.

"Not at all, really."

"Well, then," he added impatiently, "I think your language is—is indelicate."

"Do you, indeed?" She considered this. "Of course that's a matter of opinion." She abandoned the subject and seemed to be searching his face for a topic which might be more acceptable. "A good many things have happened to me," she ventured presently. "I came within an inch of getting caught by the curtain once."

He had no idea what she meant.

She continued: "It was in a regular tank town somewhere. I never pay any attention to the names of the little towns." Her tone clearly conveyed the fact that she wished to get away from controversial topics. She waited, plainly puzzled, rather than discouraged, because she received no response. "You know," she elaborated, "the audiences in the little towns don't care much whether it's something legitimate, or a tambourine show with a lot of musty jokes."

Still Baron's inclination was to make no response; but really there was such an amazing contrast between her innocent beauty and her gamin-like speech that he could not easily ignore her.

The Intrusion of an Actress

"I'm not sure I know the difference myself," he confessed.

"Well, you'd rather see 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' than a lot of Honey Boys, wouldn't you?"

"I'm afraid I'd be in favor of the Honey Boys, whoever they are, unless they are pretty bad."

She looked incredulous, and then disappointed. For an instant she turned her back on him with resolution. He observed that she squirmed herself into a position of dignified uprightness in her chair.

After a brief interval she turned to him with renewed hope. "Maybe you're prejudiced against 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'?" she ventured.

"Frankly, I am."

"You're not down on the legitimate, though?"

"I like plays—if that's what you mean."

Her forehead wrinkled. "Certainly that's what I mean. What did you think I meant?"

"Why, you see, I wasn't quite sure."

She searched his eyes suspiciously; then suddenly she dimpled. "Tell me—are you an actor? Or aren't you?"

"No—assuredly not!"

She was genuinely embarrassed. She allowed her face to drop into her hands, and Baron felt from her gesture that she must be blushing though he could see that she was not.

After a little she laughed weakly. "How childish of me!" she exclaimed. "I really had no right

Bonnie May

to make such a mistake. But please tell me how you happen to be up in this box?"

"The manager was good enough to direct an usher to bring me here."

"Well, you know, I thought this box was always given to us—to the profession, I mean. I do hope you'll forgive me." She seemed prepared to withdraw her interest from him then, as if he no longer concerned her in any way.

But Baron was looking at her searchingly, almost rudely. "Are you an—an actress?" he managed to ask.

Her manner changed. For the first time Baron detected an affectation. She looked beyond him, out toward the chattering audience, with an absurd assumption of weariness.

"I thought everybody knew me," she said. "I'm Bonnie May. You've heard of me, of course?" and she brought her eyes back to his anxiously.

"Why, yes, of course," he assented. He was uncomfortable over the untruth—or over the fact that he had not told it adroitly.

"I wouldn't have talked to you so freely if I hadn't thought you were an actor," she explained. "You know we always treat one another that way."

His manner softened. "I'm sure I understand," he assured her.

He perceived that, despite the lightness of her manner, she was truly ashamed of her mistake. It seemed to him that she was regretfully slipping back

The Intrusion of an Actress

into her own world, her own realm of thought. And she was speedily becoming, to him, not a pert minx, but just a lonely, friendly little child.

"I don't believe I know just where you are appearing now," he said. For the moment he could not do less than appear to be interested in her.

She moved uncomfortably in her chair. "I'm not doing anything just now," she said. Then her eyes brightened. "The manager skipped just when business was picking up. We had to close our season. Such a jay town we closed in. The people wanted to hold our trunks!"

"But they didn't?"

"No, we gave one more performance, so we could square up."

"Why shouldn't you have kept on giving performances?"

"Of course, you wouldn't understand. You see, the manager was our Simon Legree, and we couldn't do without him."

"But that last performance——"

"The constable who came to hold our things said he'd take the part of Simon Legree just once, so we could pay our bills and get out of town. He said there was sure to be a crowd if it was known that he would be one of the actors. He said he'd always wanted to be an actor, but that his parents thought it would be sinful for him to act."

"But did he know the part?"

"He didn't have to. Even in the profession

Bonnie May

there are a lot of us who don't know our parts half the time. You may have noticed. The constable said he could 'pop a whip' and we told him that would do, if he would remember to say 'You black rascal!' every little while. That would be to Uncle Tom, you know. Our Uncle Tom did both parts. That happens lots of times. With any play, I mean. He'd say: 'Yo' say Ah b'longs to you, Massa Legree? Oh, no, Massa Legree, Ah don' b'long to you. Yo' may own mah body, but yo' don' own mah soul.' Saying both parts, you know."

~~When Baron laughed at this she joined in the merriment and even promoted it. "The constable enjoyed it," she said. "He said he'd like to leave town with us and play the part all the time."~~

~~"He'd got over thinking it was sinful for him to act?"~~

"Yes, but the rest of us thought his first hunch was right. Besides, there were other difficulties. You see, our Topsy was the manager's wife, and she wouldn't play any more until she found her husband. She wasn't much of an artist. Anyway, we had to quit."

Baron sent a wandering glance over the theatre; but he was thinking of neither audience nor play. He wondered whose child this could be, and by what chance a little creature so alert and so friendly in her outlook upon life should be deeply submerged in the make-believe of men, when she should have been reading only the primer of real things.

The Intrusion of an Actress

Then by chance his eyes fell upon Thornburg, the manager, who stood just inside the foyer, engaged in what was seemingly an intense conversation with a tall, decidedly striking-looking woman. And even as his eyes rested upon these two they looked up at him as if he were the subject of their conversation. Or were they not, more probably, discussing the child who sat near him?

He had no time to pursue his reflections. The orchestra brought to its climax the long overture which it had been playing with almost grotesque inadequacy, and the curtain went up on the next act.

There was the sudden diminuendo of voices throughout the house, and the stealthy disturbance of an individual here and there feeling his way to his seat. Then again Baron was lost in the progress of the play.

The child shrank into herself again and became once more an absorbed, unobtruding little creature.

Baron sat in rapt silence for half an hour; and then the master dramatist, Fate, intervened, and proceeded to make him a figure in one of those real dramas before which all make-believe fades into insignificance.

At the left of the stage a flame went leaping up along the inner edge of one of the wings, and took swift hold of a cloud of filmy fabric overhead. The theatre was afire!

Baron saw and was incredulous. The child near him remained undisturbed. The persons on the

Bonnie May

stage continued their work with an evenness which, to Baron, became suddenly a deadly monotony. But back in those realms in the theatre which were all but hidden from him he saw the swift movements of men who were confronted with an unwonted, a fearful task.

He turned to the child with sudden purpose, with a manner that was harsh and peremptory. "Come!" he said. His voice was subdued yet vibrant.

The child noted the vibration and quickly caught the expression of command in his eyes. She put out a hand toward him obediently, but he excitedly ignored that. He gathered her into his arms and disappeared from the box. In an instant he was carrying her cautiously yet swiftly down a narrow stairway.

He skirted the wall of the theatre and passed the manager in the foyer. He paused long enough to whisper a few startling words, and then hurried toward the entrance. His ears were fortified for the screams of women; but he heard only the dull sound of the asbestos curtain being lowered as he passed out to the street. He did not hesitate until he had turned a corner and was well out of the way of a possible panic-stricken crowd.

He put the child down on the sidewalk; she was really a good deal above the weight of those children who are usually carried. A few steps and they had reached a confectioner's shop, in which women and children were sitting at little tables, oblivious to all menaces, far or near.

The Intrusion of an Actress

"Let's go in here," he said, trying to assume a matter-of-fact tone. The child looked searchingly into his eyes. "What was it?" she asked.

"What was what?"

"Don't!" she exclaimed with impatience. And then she looked up and down the street, where the constant stream of strangers passed. She felt forlorn, alone. She turned again to Baron as to a final refuge. "I behaved myself," she said. "I didn't wait to ask what was the matter—I didn't say a word. But I knew something had happened. I could hear your heart beating. I knew it was something terrible. But you could tell me now!"

Baron guided her to a chair and released her with a feeling of relief. His impulse was to take his departure and let the incident end as it might. But that wouldn't do, certainly! What would the confectioner do with the child? Besides, there was something about her——

Through the fitful symphony of the city's noises the clang of an alarm-bell sounded.

The child lifted her head; her eyes became wide with excitement. "There's a fire!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," admitted Baron. "It's in the theatre. I thought we ought to come out, though of course it may not amount to anything. We'll wait here until the excitement is over, and then we'll go out and find your——"

He did not finish the sentence. He realized that he did not know how. Instead he turned to a clerk

Bonnie May

and ordered something—he scarcely knew what. He was listening to those noises out in the street; he was noting, soon with great relief, that they were abating rapidly. Clearly there had been no real danger, after all.

He led his charge from the place presently. He noticed that she had not touched a little dish of something the clerk had set before her.

On the street again he was surprised to perceive that the normal activities of the neighborhood had been resumed. The audience in the theatre had been dismissed upon some pretext of a nature not at all terrifying. The fire had been extinguished. The lobby was deserted. No one was searching or waiting for a little girl, or seemed to be remotely interested in one.

“Strange!” reflected Baron. He was wholly outside the realm of make-believe now. He was amid painfully prosaic surroundings.

He turned to his companion. “Er—your name has escaped me for the minute——”

“Bonnie May.”

“Of course. Well, Bonnie May, I think I’ll have to take you home.”

“Whose home—yours?” she asked.

“Good gracious, no! To your own!”

She peered into the lobby searchingly, the light slowly fading from her eyes.

“But I haven’t any home,” she said.

CHAPTER II

A MOMENTOUS DECISION

It was all very well for a young man of an almost painfully circumspect type to rescue a youthful female from danger. It was a different matter, however, when he found himself walking along a crowded thoroughfare, leading a waif in a fantastic and almost shabby dress, and bringing upon himself the curious, if not the suspicious, glances of passers-by.

This fact struck Baron forcibly and unpleasantly.

"Come, let's get inside somewhere," he said to his companion. He spoke almost abjectly, as if he had been a soldier seeking a hiding-place behind a wall. "This place will do!" He had espied a haven in the form of a restaurant, deserted by all save two or three young women wearing waitresses' aprons and caps.

Bonnie May looked at him inquiringly, almost piteously. This movement was a mere strategy, she realized. It was not a time for eating. But the ready speech of half an hour ago had deserted her, and she entered the restaurant, when Baron opened the door for her, without saying a word.

Bonnie May

Indeed she stood so forlornly and dependently that her companion realized anew that he had somehow committed an enormous blunder.

"Sit down somewhere," he said almost impatiently; and when he noted the childish effort with which she wriggled into her chair, and tried heroically to assume a debonair manner, a feeling deeper than mere irritation seized him.

"Darn the luck!" he ruminated; "she's so little, and so lovely—what's a fellow to do in such a case, anyway?"

"It doesn't seem quite a suitable time to be eating, does it?" she observed politely. The words were accompanied by a gently deprecatory smile which amazed Baron by a quality of odd sophistication and practised self-restraint.

"We needn't eat anything," he said, more cordially. "I think we ought to order something to drink. You see, I have to decide what to do."

She adjusted certain articles on the table with feminine nicety. "That's very good of you, I'm sure," she said.

"What is?"

"I mean your taking an interest in me."

"An interest in you! What else can I do?"

She propped her face up in the palms of her hands and looked across the table at him meditatively.

"Don't!" he exclaimed. "I'm not used to having a cherub on my hands. It's my own predica-

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ment I'm thinking about, not yours. Do you drink milk?"

A waitress had approached and was standing behind them.

She resented his brusque manner, now that the waitress was there to hear. "I have done such a thing," she said. "As a rule I'm permitted to choose for myself."

"Well, by all means do, then."

She turned to the waitress and lowered her voice by a full tone. "A cup of chocolate, please; not too thick; and some wafers." She faced Baron again with a ready change of countenance and voice, and touched upon some trivial subject which he recognized as a formal means of dispelling any impression that there was something unusual in their relationship or appearance.

"Now, Bonnie May," he began, when they were alone, "I want you to help me as far as you can. Who took you to the theatre this afternoon?"

"I went with Miss Barry."

"Good. Who is Miss Barry?"

"Miss Florence Barry. You don't mean to say you don't know who she is?"

"I never heard of her."

"She's an actress. She's very well known, too."

"Very well. How did she happen to take you? How did you happen to be with her?"

"I've always been with her. She's all I've got."

Bonnie May

"We're getting along nicely. You're related to her, I suppose?"

"I couldn't say. It's possible."

Baron frowned. "Your mother is dead?" he asked.

She gazed at him with a gathering cloud in her eyes—a look that was eloquent of secret sorrow and beseechment. But she made no response in words.

Baron felt the pangs of swift remorse. "I suppose Miss Barry will have to do," he said, with an attempt at kindly brusqueness. Then—"Can you tell me her address?"

"I don't suppose she has any. We've been doing one-night stands quite a long time."

"But she must belong some place—and you, too. Where have you been stopping?"

"We only got here yesterday. I see you don't quite understand. We've just been moving from place to place all the time."

Baron pondered. "Have you always lived in hotels, in one town or another?" he finally asked.

"Hotels—and theatres and rooming-houses, and trains and even wagons and carriages. Every kind of place."

"I see. Well, where did you stop last night?"

"We had a room somewhere. I really couldn't tell you where. It was the meanest kind of a place—empty and cold—quite a distance from the theatre. It was in a long row of houses, built one

A Momentous Decision

up against another, miles and miles long, with cheap, little old stores or shops down-stairs, and sometimes rooms above that you could rent. We were just getting ready to look for an engagement, you know, and we were broke. We couldn't afford to go to a nice place."

The fine show of bravery was beginning to pass. She felt that she was being questioned unsympathetically.

Baron, too, realized that his questions must seem to lack friendliness.

The waiter brought chocolate and coffee, and Baron dropped sugar into his cup, thoughtfully watching the little bubbles that arose. Then, much to Bonnie May's surprise, and not a little to her relief, he laughed softly.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"Oh, nothing."

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure," was Bonnie May's chilling rejoinder. She began to sip her chocolate with impressive elegance.

"Why not?" reflected Baron. He was drawing a picture of Bonnie May in his mother's presence—his mother, who was the most punctilious of all elderly ladies, and whose genuine goodness of heart was usually quite concealed by the studied way in which she adhered to the unbending social codes that must govern a Baron—or, rather, a Boone. She was a Boone—of the Virginia Boones—when she married Baron's father; a beauty who had

Bonnie May

been wealthy, despite the disintegration of the Boone fortunes when the Civil War freed the slaves.

He pictured Bonnie May in the dim old mansion that was his home—in that aged house that never knew the voices of children; in which even adults seemed always to be speaking in low, measured tones.

“The governess isn’t as bad as she would like to appear,” was his irreverent meditation, which still related to his mother. “And Flora would take my part. As for the governor——”

He turned to the child with decision. He realized, finally, that the question of treating her just as if she were any other lost child was not to be considered.

“Bonnie May,” he said, “I think you’d better go home with me for the time being. We can put something in the paper, you know, and I’ll find out if Miss Barry has left any word with the police. But that can’t be done in a minute, and of course we can’t sit here all afternoon. Come, let’s go home.”

The waitress came forward to assist when she saw Bonnie May trying to climb down from her chair without loss of dignity.

“It was very nice,” said the child, addressing the waitress. She was smiling angelically. “I think we’re ready,” she added, turning toward Baron.

A Momentous Decision

She tried to catch step with him as they moved toward the door.

And Baron could not possibly have known that at that very moment his mother and his sister Flora were sitting in an upper room of the mansion, brooding upon the evil days that had fallen upon the family fortunes.

Theirs was a very stately and admirable home—viewed from within. But it was practically all that the family possessed, and the neighborhood—well, the neighborhood had wholly lost eligibility as a place for residences long ago.

All their friends, who had formerly been their neighbors, had moved away, one after another, when commerce had descended upon the street, with its grime and smoke, & only the Barons remained. Certainly cities grow without any regard at all for the dignity of old mansions or old families.

And while the ground on which the mansion stood had increased in value until it was worth a considerable fortune, it was a carefully guarded family secret that the actual supply of funds in the family treasury had dwindled down to next to nothing.

One permanent investment brought Mrs. Baron a few hundreds annually, and Mr. Baron drew a modest salary from a position with the city, which he had held many years without complaint or lapses. But the fortune that used to be theirs

Bonnie May

had vanished mysteriously in trips to Europe and in the keeping up of those social obligations which they could not disregard. The formal social activities of the mansion had become wholly things of the past, and within the past year or two the visits of old friends, now living out in commodious new residential districts, had become few and far between. Really it seemed that the Barons had been forgotten.

Flora, looking suddenly into her mother's brooding, fine old eyes, and quite accurately reading the thought that was beyond them, sighed and arose.

"It's the neighborhood," she said—quite ambiguously, it would have seemed, since not a word had passed between them for nearly half an hour.

But Mrs. Baron responded: "Do you think so?" And her face stiffened with new resolve not to repine, even if the currents of life had drawn away from them and left them desolate.

Then an automobile drew up in front of the mansion and Flora's face brightened. "They've come!" she said. "I won't be gone long, mother," and she hurried away to her room.

A moment later Mrs. Baron heard her going down the stairs and closing the front door.

She stood at the window and watched Flora get into the shining electric coupé of the McKelvey girls. She caught a glimpse of the McKelvey girls' animated faces, and then the elegant little vehicle moved away.

A Momentous Decision

Still she stood at the window. Her face was rather proud and defiant. And then after a time it became, suddenly, quite blank.

There was Victor coming up the stone steps into the yard, and he was leading a waif by the hand. Only the word "waif" did not occur to Mrs. Baron.

"Well!" she exclaimed, her body rigid, her eyes staring out from beneath pugnacious brows. "Victor and an impossible little female!"

CHAPTER III

MRS. BARON DECIDES

As Baron felt for his key he stood an instant and surveyed the other side of the street, up and down the block. A frown gathered on his forehead.

Bonnie May, keyed to a very high pitch, noted that frowning survey of the line of buildings across the way. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"No, certainly not," responded Baron; but to himself he was admitting that there was something very wrong indeed. It was the neighborhood. This was his conclusion, just as it had been Flora's.

He had become conscious of the frowning, grimy fronts; the windows which were like eyes turning baleful glances upon the thoroughfare. The grass-plots, the flower-beds, the suitable carpets spread for the feet of spring—what had become of them?

A dissolute-appearing old woman was scrubbing the ancient stone steps in one place across the way. She suggested better days just as obviously as did the stones, worn away by generations of feet. And a little farther along there were glaring plate-glass fronts bearing gilt legends which fairly shrieked those commercial words—which ought to

Mrs. Baron Decides

have been whispered from side doors, Baron thought—Shoes, and Cloaks, and Hats.

What sort of a vicinity was this in which to have a home?

Baron wondered why the question had not occurred to him before. He did not realize that he was viewing the street now for the first time through the eyes of a child who owed the neighborhood no sort of sentimental loyalty.

"Here we are!" he exclaimed as he produced his key; but his tone was by no means as cheerful as he tried to make it.

Bonnie May hung back an instant, as a butterfly might pause at the entrance of a dark wood. She glanced into the dark vestibule before her inquiringly. Her eyebrows were critically elevated.

"Is it a—a rooming-house?" she faltered.

"Nonsense! It's always been called a mansion. It's a charming old place, too—I assure you! Come, we ought not to stand here."

He was irritated. More so than he had been before when his companion's look or word had served as a reminder that he was doing an extraordinary, if not a foolish, thing. He would not have admitted it, but he was nervous, too. His mother hadn't been at all amiable of late. There wasn't any telling what she would do when he said to her, in effect: "Here's a lost child. I don't know anything at all about her, but I expect you to help her."

Bonnie May

Suppose she should decide to express her frank opinion of waifs, and of people who brought them home?

He fumbled a little as he unlocked the door. His heart was fairly pounding.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. His voice was as gayly hospitable as he could make it, but his secret thought was: "If she weren't so—so—Oh, darn it, if she were like any other child I'd shut her out this minute and let that be the end of it."

The hall was shadowy; yet even in the dim light Baron perceived that the marble balustrade of the stairway was strangely cold and unattractive—and he had always considered this one of the fine things about the house. So, too, was the drawing-room gloomy almost to darkness. The blinds were down as always, save on special occasions. And Baron realized that the family had long ago ceased to care about looking out upon the street, or to permit the street to get a glimpse of the life within. Indeed, he realized with a bit of a shock that the home life had been almost entirely removed to the upper floor—as if the premises were being submerged by a flood.

He lifted one of the blinds. "Sit down," he said. "I'll find mother."

"What do you use this room for?" inquired Bonnie May. She was slightly pale. She seemed to be fortifying herself for weird developments.

Mrs. Baron Decides

"I hardly know," Baron confessed. "I think we don't use it very much at all."

"You might think from the properties that it was a rooming-house." She had wriggled into a chair that was too high for her. Her curiosity was unconcealed. Baron could see by the look in her eyes that she had not meant her comment to be derisive, but only a statement of fact.

"Possibly you haven't seen many quite old, thoroughly established homes," he suggested. The remark wasn't meant at all as a rebuke. It represented the attitude of mind with which Baron had always been familiar.

"Anyway," she persisted, "it wouldn't do for an up-to-date interior. It might do for an Ibsen play."

Baron, about to leave the room to find his mother, turned sharply. "What in the world do you know about Ibsen plays?" he asked sharply. "Besides, you're not in a theatre! If you'll excuse me a minute——"

There were footsteps on the stairway, and Baron's countenance underwent a swift change. He withdrew a little way into the room, so that he stood close to Bonnie May. He was trying to look conciliatory when his mother appeared in the doorway; but guilt was really the expression that was stamped on his face.

It was a very austere-looking old lady who looked into the room. "Good evening," she said,

Bonnie May

as if she were addressing strangers. Still, Baron detected a wryly humorous smile on her lips. She stood quite still, critically inspecting her son as well as his companion.

Baron was glad that Bonnie May sprang to her feet instantly with comprehension and respect. "This is my mother, Mrs. Baron," he said to the child; and to the quizzical old lady, who regarded him with a steady question, he added foolishly, "this is a little girl I have brought home."

"So I should have surmised." Her tone was hardening. Her attitude was fearfully unyielding. It seemed to Baron that her gray hair, which rose high and free from her forehead, had never imparted so much severity to her features before, and that her black eyes had never seemed so imperious.

But Bonnie May was advancing very prettily. "How do you do, Mrs. Baron?" she inquired. She was smiling almost radiantly. "I do hope I don't intrude," she added.

Mrs. Baron looked down at her with frank amazement. For the moment she forgot the presence of her son. She took the child's outstretched hand.

Perhaps the touch of a child's fingers to a woman who has had children but who has them no longer is magical. Perhaps Bonnie May was quite as extraordinary as Victor Baron had thought her. At any rate, Mrs. Baron's face suddenly softened. She drew the child into the protection of her arm and held her close, looking at her son.

Mrs. Baron Decides

"Who in the world is she?" she asked, and Baron saw that her eyes were touched with a light which was quite unfamiliar to him.

"I was going to tell you," he faltered, and then he remembered that there was practically nothing he could tell. He saved time by suggesting: "Perhaps she could go up-stairs a minute, while I talk to you alone?"

"Would it be wrong for me to hear?" This was from the child. "You know I might throw a little light on the subject myself."

Mrs. Baron blushed rosily and placed her hand over her mouth, wrenching a swift smile therefrom. She had heard of precocious children. She disapproved of them. Neither of her own children had been in the least precocious. "Who ever heard anything like that?" she demanded of her son in frank amazement.

"There are some things I ought to say to my mother alone," declared Baron. He placed a persuasive hand on the child's shoulder. "Afterward you can talk the matter over together."

Mrs. Baron's doubts were returning. "I don't see why we should make any mysteries," she said. She looked at the child again, and again all her defenses were laid low. "I suppose she might go up-stairs to my sitting-room, if there's anything to say. Tell me, child," and she bent quite graciously over the small guest, "what is your name?"

"I am Bonnie May," was the response. The

Bonnie May

child was inordinately proud of her name, but she did not wish to be vainglorious now. She lowered her eyes with an obviously theatrical effect, assuming a nice modesty.

Mrs. Baron observed sharply, and nodded her head.

"That's a queer name for a human being," was her comment. She looked at her son as if she suddenly had a bad taste in her mouth. "It sounds like a doll-baby's name."

The child was shocked by the unfriendliness—the rudeness—of this. Mrs. Baron followed up her words with more disparagement in the way of a steady, disapproving look. Precocious children ought to be snubbed, she thought.

The good lady would not have offended one of her own age without a better reason; but so many good people do not greatly mind offending a child.

"You know," said Bonnie May, "I really didn't have anything to do with picking out my own name. Somebody else did it for me. And maybe they decided on it because they thought it would look good on the four-sheets."

"On the——"

But Baron swiftly interposed.

"We can go into matters of that sort some other time," he said. "I think it would be better for you to leave mother and me alone for a minute just now."

Bonnie May went out of the room in response

Mrs. Baron Decides

to Baron's gesture. "I'll show you the way," he said, and as he began to guide her up the stairs she turned toward him, glancing cautiously over his shoulder to the room they had just quitted.

"Believe me," she whispered, "that's the first time I've had stage fright in years." She mounted three or four steps and then paused again. "You know," she confided, turning again, "she makes you think of a kind of honest sister to Lady Macbeth."

Baron stopped short, his hand on the balustrade. "Bonnie May," he demanded, "will you tell me how old you are?"

He had a sudden fear that she was one of those pitiable creatures whose minds grow old but whose bodies remain the same from year to year.

"I don't know," she replied, instantly troubled. "Miss Barry never would tell me."

"Well, how far back can you remember?"

"Oh, quite a long time. I know I had a real speaking part as long as four seasons ago. I've been doing little Eva off and on over two years."

He was greatly relieved. "It seems to me," he said severely, "that you know about plays which a little girl ought not to know anything about."

"Oh! Well, I was with Miss Barry in lots of plays that I didn't have any part in, unless it might be to help out with the populace, or something like that. And we did stock work for a while, with a new play every week."

Bonnie May

Somehow this speech had the effect of restoring her to favor with Baron. Her offenses were clearly unconscious, unintended, while her alertness, her discernment, were very genuine and native. What a real human being she was, after all, despite her training in the unrealities of life! And how quick she was to see when she had offended, and how ready with contrition and apology! Surely that was the sort of thing that made for good breeding—even from the standpoint of a Baron or a Boone!

They traversed the upper hall until they reached an immense front room which was filled with the mellow sunlight of the late afternoon, and which was invitingly informal and untidy in all its aspects. It was one of those rooms which seem alive, because of many things which speak eloquently of recent occupation and of the certainty of their being occupied immediately again.

A square piano, pearl inlaid and venerable, caught Bonnie May's eyes.

"Oh, how lovely!" she exclaimed. She stood a moment, pressing her hands to her cheeks. "Yes," she added musingly, "I can actually see them."

"See whom?" Baron demanded, slightly impatient.

"The nice, sweet girls, wearing crinoline, and dancing with their arms around one another's waists, and one of them sitting at the piano playing, and looking over her shoulder at the others. There are tender smiles on their lips, and their

Mrs. Baron Decides

eyes are shining like anything. They are so dear and happy!"

Baron frowned. Why should the child associate the house, his home, only with things so remote with respect to time and place? It was a jealously guarded family secret that life was relentlessly passing on, leaving them stranded in old ways. But was a child—a waif picked up in pity, or in a spirit of adventure—to wrest the secret from among hidden things and flaunt it in his face?

She had gone into the big bay window and was standing with one hand on the long willow seat, covered with pale-hued cushions. For the moment she was looking down upon the bit of grass-plot below.

"Make yourself at home," invited Baron. "I won't be long."

He went back to his mother. He wished she might have heard what the child had said about the girls who were dancing, far away in the past.

"Well, who is she?" was Mrs. Baron's abrupt, matter-of-fact question.

"I don't know. That's the plain truth. I'm thinking more about *what* she is—or what she seems to be."

He described the incident in the theatre, and explained how he had been in fear of a panic. "I felt obliged to carry her out," he concluded rather lamely.

"I quite see that. But that didn't make you

Bonnie May

responsible for her in any way," Mrs. Baron reminded him.

"Well now, governess, do be friendly. I'm not responsible for her—I know that. But you see, she appears to be alone in the world, except for a Miss Barry, an actress. I couldn't find her. Of course she'll be located to-morrow. That's all there is to it. And let's not be so awfully particular. There can't be any harm in having the little thing in the house overnight. Honestly, don't you think she is wonderful?"

Mrs. Baron was diligently nursing her wrath. "That isn't the question," she argued. "I dare say a good many unidentified children are wonderful. But that would scarcely justify us in turning our house into an orphan asylum."

"Oh! An orphan asylum!" echoed Baron almost despairingly. "Look here, mother, it was just by chance that I ran across the little thing, and under the circumstances what was I going to do with her?"

"There were the police, at least."

"Yes, I thought of that."

He went to the window and stood with his back to her. For a full minute there was silence in the room, and then Baron spoke. He did not turn around.

"Yes, there were the police," he repeated, "but I couldn't help remembering that there was also I—and we. I had an idea we could do a good deal

Mrs. Baron Decides

better than the police, in a case like this. I don't understand how women feel, mother, but I can't help remembering that every little girl is going to be a woman some day. And I've no doubt that the kind of woman she is going to be will be governed a good deal by seemingly trivial events. I don't see why it isn't likely that Bonnie May's whole future may depend upon the way things fall out for her now, when she's really helpless and alone for the first time in her life. I think it's likely she'll remember to the end of her days that people were kind to her—or that they weren't. We've nothing to be afraid of at the hands of a little bit of a girl. At the most, we'll have to give her a bed for the night and a bite to eat and just a little friendliness. It's she who must be afraid of us!—afraid that we'll be thoughtless, or snobbish, and refuse to give her the comfort she needs, now that she's in trouble."

He paused.

"A speech!" exclaimed Mrs. Baron, and Baron could not fail to note the irony in her voice. She added, in the same tone: "The haughty mother yields to the impassioned plea of her noble son!"

Baron turned and observed that she was smiling rather maliciously.

"You'd better go up and look after her," she added. "Flora will be home before long."

CHAPTER IV

A CRISIS

At five o'clock, during a brief lull in the usual noises on the avenue, there was a faint and aristocratic murmur of machinery in front of the mansion. The McKelvey girls' motor-car drew up at the curb, and Miss Flora Baron alighted.

The Misses McKelvey had come for her early in the afternoon and had driven her out to their suburban home, where she was always treated almost like one of the family.

She was the sort of girl that people love unquestioningly: gentle, low-voiced, seemingly happy, grateful, gracious. Besides, there was a social kinship between the two families. Mrs. McKelvey had been a Miss Van Sant before her marriage, and the Van Sants and the Boones had been neighbors for a century or more.

"Good-by, Flora," called the McKelvey girls almost in one voice, as their guest hurried toward her gate. Their cheerful faces were framed by the open door of their shining coupé. And Flora looked back over her shoulder and responded gayly, and then hurried up into the vestibule of the mansion.

She carried an armful of roses which the McKel-

A Crisis

veys had insisted upon her bringing home: roses with long stems, from which many of the green, wax-like leaves had not been removed.

When she entered the hall she paused and sighed. Now that her friends could not see her any longer, she abandoned a certain gladsome bearing. It was so lovely out at the McKelveys', and it was so—so different, here at home. She had the feeling one might have upon entering a dungeon.

The fingers of her right hand closed upon the dull-green-and-silver tailored skirt she was wearing, and one foot was already planted on the first step of the stairway. She meant to offer the roses to her mother, who would be in the sitting-room upstairs.

But before she had mounted to the second step she heard her brother Victor's voice in the dining-room, and she knew by his manner of speaking that he was at the telephone.

This circumstance in itself was not remarkable, but he was asking for police headquarters!

Visions of a burglary passed before her mind, and she wondered whimsically what anybody could find in the house worth stealing. Her brother's next words reached her clearly:

"Oh, I couldn't say just how old she is. Say about ten. Somebody must have reported that she is lost. . . . Well, that certainly seems strange. . . ."

Flora changed her mind about going up-stairs

Bonnie May

immediately. Instead, she turned toward the dining-room. Victor was continuing his message: "Are you sure such a report hasn't been made at one of the substations?" And after a brief interval there was the sound of the receiver being hung up.

However, when Flora entered the dining-room her brother was speaking at the telephone again. More about a little girl. "Mr. Thornburg's office? Mr. Thornburg? This is Baron speaking. Say—has anybody spoken to you about losing a little girl this afternoon?"

Flora perceived that he was deeply concerned; his attitude was even strikingly purposeful—and Victor usually appeared to have no definite purposes at all.

"Yes," he continued, clearly in answer to words from the other end of the wire, "I brought her home with me. I didn't know what else to do. I thought somebody might have inquired at the theatre about her. If they do, you'll let me know right away, won't you? She'll probably be with us here until she's claimed."

He hung up the receiver. His eyes were unusually bright.

"Here? Who?" demanded Flora.

Baron beamed upon her. "Flora!" he cried. "I'm glad you've come. Something has happened!"

"Who's here?"

A Crisis

"The renowned actress, Bonnie May."

"Please tell me!" she begged, as if he had made no response at all.

"A little lost girl." Then Baron briefly explained.

Miss Baron's eyes fairly danced. "What an adventure!" She added presently: "Is she—nice?"

"Nice? That's a woman's first question every time, isn't it?" Baron reflected. "I suppose so. I know she's pretty—the very prettiest thing!"

"And that's a man's first consideration, of course. What did mother say?"

"Mother is—resigned." They moved toward the stairway. "Try to persuade mother that a child doesn't count," Baron urged. "I'm sure Mrs. Grundy never had any children. None like Bonnie May, anyway. When you've once seen her——"

They were ascending the stairway eagerly, whispering. A dozen years at least seemed to have slipped from their shoulders. They entered Mrs. Baron's sitting-room quite eagerly.

Mrs. Baron and Bonnie May were sitting quite close together, the guest in a low chair that was Flora's. Mrs. Baron was maintaining the rôle of indulgent but overridden oracle; Bonnie May was amiably inclined to make allowances. They were conversing in a rather sedate fashion.

"My sister, Flora, Bonnie May," said Baron.

The child came forward eagerly. "How lovely!" she exclaimed, extending her hand.

Bonnie May

Flora regarded the child with smiling eyes. "Oh! you mean the roses," she said. "Yes, they are." But she did not look at the flowers on her arm. She pushed a pennon-like fragment of veil away from her face and smiled quietly at the child.

"I didn't mean them," explained Bonnie May. "I meant it was lovely that you should be—that I'm to have— Do excuse me, I mean that *you* are lovely!"

Only an instant longer Miss Baron remained as if happily spellbound. A breath that was fragrant and cool emanated from her and her roses. The hue of pleasure slowly deepened in her cheeks.

"You dear child!" she said at last, the spell broken, "I can't remember when anybody has said such a thing to me before."

She laid the roses in her mother's lap. "And to think we're to keep her!" she added.

"Overnight," Mrs. Baron made haste to say. "Yes, she is to be our guest until to-morrow."

"But nobody has inquired for her," said Flora. "Victor's been telephoning. The police and the people at the theatre——"

"Where did you get such beautiful roses?" inquired Mrs. Baron, wholly by way of interruption. The arch of her eyebrows was as a weather-signal which Flora never disregarded. She changed the subject. She had much to say about her ride. But her eyes kept straying back to Bonnie May, who remained silent, her body leaning slightly

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forward, her head pitched back, her eyes devouring Miss Baron's face. The attitude was so touchingly childlike that Flora had visions of herself in a big rocking-chair, putting the little thing to sleep, or telling her stories. "Only until to-morrow," her mother had said, but no one was asking for the child anywhere. Of course she would stay until—until—

"Yes," she said absent-mindedly, in response to a question by her mother, "they brought me home in their car. They were so lovely to me!" Her eyes strayed back to Bonnie May, whose rapt gaze was fixed upon her. The child flushed and smiled angelically.

If any constraint was felt during the dinner-hour, Bonnie May was evidently less affected than the others at table.

The one test which might have been regarded as a critical one—the appearance of the head of the household—was easily met.

Mr. Baron came home a little late and immediately disappeared to dress for dinner. Bonnie May did not get even a glimpse of him until the family took their places at table.

"Hello! Who said there weren't any more fairies?" was his cheerful greeting, as he stood an instant beside his chair before he sat down. He was a tall, distinguished-looking man with a pointed gray beard, which seemed always to have been of

Bonnie May

its present color, rather than to suggest venerableness. He had piercing gray eyes, which seemed formidable under their definite black eyebrows. However, his eyes readily yielded to a twinkle when he smiled. He still adhered rigidly to the custom of dressing formally for dinner, and he entertained a suspicion that Victor's vocation, which consisted of literary work of some indefinite kind, was making him sadly Bohemian, since his son did not perceive the need of being so punctilious. "It's not as if we had company often," was Victor's defense, on one occasion, of the course he had adopted; but his father's retort had been that "they were still in the habit of dining with one another."

"A little girl we are sheltering to-night," was Mrs. Baron's explanation to her husband, who still regarded the child at the opposite end of the table.

"I am Bonnie May," amended the child. "I am very glad to meet you, I'm sure." She smiled graciously and nodded with such dignity as was compatible with a rather difficult position. She was occupying an "adult" chair, and little more than her head and shoulders was visible. She had briefly yet firmly discouraged the suggestion that she sit on a book.

"A—protégée of Victor's," added Mrs. Baron, with the amiable malice which the family easily recognized.

But Flora noted the word "protégée" and smiled. To her mind it suggested permanency.

A Crisis

"A very fine little girl, I'm sure," was Mr. Baron's comment. He was critically looking at the fowl which Mrs. Shepard, housekeeper and woman of all work, had placed before him. His entire attention was immediately monopolized by the carving implements. He appeared to forget the child's presence.

This fact is set down as a significant one, because Flora and Baron, Jr., were both keenly and frankly interested in his impression. If he didn't mind having her about, another point in her favor would have been gained. Mrs. Baron, too, was covertly interested in his attitude. She was not quite sure whether she wished him to confirm her fears or to share her son's and daughter's faith in the unexpected guest.

Thereafter the meal progressed somewhat silently. Every individual in the group was alertly awaiting developments.

"Children always like the drumstick," declared Mr. Baron genially, looking at Bonnie May.

"Yes, I believe so," admitted the guest politely. She added casually: "I usually prefer the wing."

Mr. Baron rested the carving knife and fork on his plate and scrutinized the speaker sharply. The child was opening her napkin with a kind of elegant deliberation.

Then he smiled. "A wing it shall be," he declared.

Later Mrs. Baron took occasion to assert her

Bonnie May

authority. "Children should not stare," she declared, trying to assume a severe contralto tone, but taking care to smile, so that her rebuke would seem to have been kindly offered.

Indeed, Bonnie May was paying less attention to her dinner than to the exquisite napkin, the cut-glass vase in which some of the flowers had been placed, the dinner-set of china, and to the countenances about her.

"Quite true," she admitted, in response to Mrs. Baron. "But you know, when you get into a new company, it's quite natural to size everybody up, so you can make up your mind what to expect of them."

She took a very small bite from a young green onion, holding her little finger elegantly apart. "How prettily the white blends with the green," she said approvingly, looking critically at the onion.

Mrs. Baron flushed. "My remark was that children ought not to stare," she repeated persistently and less gently.

The child's serenity failed her. "I don't, usually," she said in painful embarrassment, "and I don't believe I criticise people's manners, either, unless it's in private."

She regained her self-control immediately. She replaced the onion on her plate and lifted her napkin to her lips with exquisite care.

The adult persons at the table were all looking

A Crisis

from one to another. There were horizontal lines in every forehead.

"I can't remember having been anywhere where the service was so admirable," the guest added, directing her glance toward her own section of the board. There was a suggestion of gentle ennui in her tone.

Mrs. Baron was glaring at her, her face aflame with mortification. It was a countenance the family was familiar with.

"Well, what have you been doing to-day, Victor?" inquired Mr. Baron jocosely.

It was the tone—and the tactics—he always adopted when he wished to avoid a crisis.

And during the remainder of the meal, Bonnie May was an extraordinarily circumspect and silent little girl.

CHAPTER V

BONNIE MAY OPENS THE DOOR

THERE was a polite, somewhat nervous exchange of remarks at the table during the remainder of the dinner-hour. It was the kind of conversation that is employed sometimes not only to conceal thought, but to divert attention from the fact that there is anything to think about.

Nevertheless, every member of the family was thinking hard—and uncomfortably.

Baron, Sr., was trying patiently to determine what subtle thing had gone wrong. Mrs. Baron, he knew, was not disagreeable without at least an imaginary cause.

Victor and Flora were thinking along somewhat similar lines. Why had their mother deliberately offended an inoffending guest? They knew their guest was readily to be classified as a "precocious" child, and Mrs. Baron had always manifested a strong dislike—almost a dread—of precocious children, whose remarks are sometimes so disconcerting to those who are not very liberal-minded.

But it was not at all likely that Bonnie May would remain a member of the household longer than a day or so. Indeed, it seemed quite prob-

Bonnie May Opens the Door

able that she would be called for at any moment. Such a child would not be permitted by relatives or guardians to go begging.

Yet Mrs. Baron's conduct might have been accepted as that of one who begins the tutelage of an adopted daughter. Had their mother jumped to the conclusion that Bonnie May had come to live with them permanently, and was she willing to contemplate such an arrangement?

Beneath their small talk, therefore, they were indulging in decidedly wild hopes and fancies.

When the family were about to leave the table, Mrs. Baron called the housekeeper. The others appeared not to notice particularly, but secretly they were all attention.

Said Mrs. Baron:

"Mrs. Shepard, this little girl's name is Bonnie May. She is to stay with us this evening. Will you see that the spare room in the attic is made ready? and if you can add to her comfort in any way, I'm sure you will."

"Yes, ma'am," said Mrs. Shepard. The good, simple creature was trying to hide her amazement. The child had been a guest at the table—and she was to be put up in the attic to sleep! The attic was really a third floor; but it was used mainly for storing things, and for the houseman's quarters. She regarded Bonnie May briefly—and her eyes twinkled! The child was smiling at her amiably.

"Mother!" was Flora's hesitating remonstrance,

Bonnie May

and Victor paid such studious heed to the folding of his napkin that it was evident he was trying to hide his discomfort. In a moment he spoke—quite casually: "I'm afraid it will be lonesome up there for her, mother. Suppose you let her have my room to-night. I won't mind giving it up."

"Nonsense! There's no need of your being disturbed." Mrs. Baron's forehead was still creased by menacing horizontal lines.

The guest interposed. The family was rising, and she stood with her back to the table. "If you don't mind, Mrs. Baron," she said evenly, "I'll go back and make friends with Mrs. Shepard. You know I dearly love the people who take the—the character parts. They're usually so comfortable!"

"Well, run along." She tried not to speak impatiently. She felt that there was general disapproval of her mood.

The guest went into the kitchen. At the door she turned. "It was a lovely dinner," she said politely. Then she disappeared.

Silence followed, and the family dispersed. Mr. Baron was going out somewhere. Victor strolled musingly up into the library. Flora followed her mother up into the sitting-room. There was a good deal of mental tension, considering the very slight foundation for it.

In the kitchen Bonnie May's glad bearing vanished. She became strangely pensive for a little

Bonnie May Opens the Door

girl. Mrs. Baron did not like her! That was evident. Yet what had she done, save to take her own part, as she had always had to do?

Mrs. Shepard did not realize that the child was troubled. When children were troubled, according to Mrs. Shepard's experience, their lips trembled or their eyes filled with tears. There were no such signs to be read in Bonnie May's face. She was standing there in that dazed fashion because she was in a strange place, of course.

"Wait until my work's done and I'll bake you a little cake!" said Mrs. Shepard. She was delighted with the idea. It occurred to her that it would be a great pleasure to bake a little cake for the child.

"A little cake?" responded Bonnie May dubiously. "It's kind of you, you know, but really I've just dined." She put all troubled thoughts away from her. The kitchen was really a wonderful place. She examined various utensils with interest. They had all been *used*. She had seen many of these things before, but they had always been shiny and new. The property-man had taken care of them.

A little bell above Mrs. Shepard's head tinkled energetically. The housekeeper sighed heavily and began wiping her hands hastily.

"What is it?" inquired Bonnie May.

"The front-door bell," was the answer.

"Oh! how interesting. Let me answer it—do!"

Bonnie May

And before Mrs. Shepard could carefully consider the matter, she gave a reluctant consent. She would have explained what one should do under certain contingencies, but there hadn't been time. Bonnie May was gone.

As the child passed through the hall she heard the family moving about up-stairs. Their voices seemed quite remote; they were almost inaudible. Bonnie May thought it quite probable that they had not heard the summons at the door.

She felt a new kind of elation at being permitted to officiate in even a very small domestic function. She was going to admit some one who really came from out of the unknown—whose every word and movement would not be known to her beforehand.

Then the mansion seemed to become strangely silent, as if it were listening uneasily to learn who it was that had come out of the darkness and sounded a summons to those within.

Bonnie May caught her breath. Her face was fairly glowing when she opened the door.

A gentleman stood there; a man who was very substantial-looking and by no means formidable in appearance. The hall-light fell on him. It seemed to Bonnie May that he was quite middle-aged. He was well-dressed in a rather informal way. A short-cropped black mustache had the effect of retreating slightly between two ruddy cheeks. His eyes expressed some degree of merri-

Bonnie May Opens the Door

ment—of mischief, and this fact gave him standing with Bonnie May immediately.

“Good evening,” said Bonnie May in her most friendly manner. She waited, looking inquiringly up into the twinkling eyes.

“I came to see Miss Baron. Is she at home?”

“Will you come in? I’ll see.”

She led the way into the big drawing-room, which was in complete darkness, save for such rays of light as penetrated from the hall. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to light the gas,” she added. “It’s too high for me to reach.”

“Maybe I’d better wait in the hall until you go and tell Miss Flora.”

“Certainly not. Light the gas, please.”

He obeyed, and as the light fell suddenly upon his face she saw that there was a mischievously meditative gleam in his eyes.

Still holding the burnt match in his fingers, he turned to her. “I don’t believe I’ve met you before?” he said.

“I only came to-day. Will you sit down?”

“You—living here?” The caller appeared to be in no hurry to have his arrival announced. He listened a moment to the faint voices above, and seemed reassured.

“Why, yes—I think so. You see, I always live wherever I happen to be.” She smiled brightly, to rob her words of any seeming unfriendliness. She regarded him more in detail. He was a big-

Bonnie May

bodied man, with a proper tendency to dwindle away neatly from the shoulders down. His hair was of the sort that refuses to be quite nice. It was astonishingly thick and dark, with an occasional glint of silver in it, and it was close-cropped. She liked the way he stood, too; his chest well out, his head back, and as if nothing could disturb his balance. Bonnie May had seen so many men who stood as if they needed propping up, or as if they would be more secure if they had four legs to stand on.

He returned her careful scrutiny, and the look of approval in her eyes brought a ruddier glow to his cheeks and a merrier look to his eyes.

He sat down and held out both his hands, smiling so broadly that she could see many white, lustrous teeth.

She put her hands into his without hesitation. She felt extraordinarily happy.

"Tell me," she whispered, "are you the—the Romeo in the cast?"

He released her hands and brought his own down upon his knees with vehemence. His eyes were almost shouting with merriment now.

"Wasn't Romeo in kind of bad standing with his prospective parents-in-law?"

"Something like that. He couldn't see Her, except up in a balcony."

He nodded his head. "Well, then, I'm the Romeo!"

Bonnie May Opens the Door

Again she regarded him critically. "You seem a little old for the part," she suggested.

"Do you think so?" He was thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe that's what Mrs. Baron thinks. She won't even let me stand under a balcony, when she can help it."

"Isn't she quaint!" This with smiling indulgence. "But of course you don't pay any attention to that?"

"Oh, yes I do; we—we have to!"

Bonnie May looked puzzled. "I can't understand it," she said. "You look like the kind that they always play the loud music for."

"The—loud music?" he echoed.

"As if you were the oldest son, come back in the last act to lift the mortgage."

They smiled into each other's eyes, and then Bonnie May drew close to him. She whispered: "I'll see if I can't get her out of the balcony." She turned toward the door. "Shall I just tell her that Romeo is here?"

He stared after her in delighted amazement. "Lord help us, no! Say it's Mr. Addis." His face radiated a joyous light even after she went out of the room and softly closed the door.

She went up-stairs softly singing. At the door of the sitting-room she paused. Within, Mrs. Baron was reading one of those irreproachable-looking books which are always about something very remote. She did not look up at Bonnie May's approach.

Bonnie May

Miss Baron occupied a soft seat in the bay window, and it was clear that she was troubled a little.

The child beckoned, and Flora's face instantly brightened.

Mrs. Baron was fully aware of all that transpired. She believed the guest was afraid of her. She felt a mild gratification.

When Flora came out into the hall Bonnie May whispered: "I want you to come down-stairs with me." She took Flora's hand and patted it quite blissfully.

They got to the foot of the stairs just in time to see the outlines of a masculine form mounting the front steps. The frosted glass in the door permitted this much to be seen.

"Some one else!" commented Bonnie May, and she turned to Flora. "Do you have so much company every evening?" she asked.

"So much company!" echoed Flora; she looked puzzled.

"Well, never mind," Bonnie May hastened to add. "Some one is expecting you in the drawing-room. And please let me receive the new visitor!"

She opened the drawing-room door, and watched while Flora wonderingly entered. Then she pulled the door to cautiously. She had heard a low, forlorn note of surprise in Flora's voice, and Mr. Addis's eager, whispered greeting.

Then she opened the front door in time to prevent the newcomer from ringing.

Bonnie May Opens the Door

A young man of a rather assertive Bohemian appearance stood before her.

"Hello!" was his greeting. The tone denoted surprise, rather than familiarity. He hastily added: "Excuse me—is Victor—Mr. Baron—in?"

Bonnie May perceived that he was not quite comfortable, not at all self-possessed. He seemed to her a strange person to be calling on any of the Barons. Still, he seemed rather human.

"I'll see," she said. "Please step inside." She would make him wait in the hall, she decided.

"Tell him, please, that Baggot has called—that I've brought the first act of my play."

"A play! Oh!"

Again she hurried up the stairs; this time with unconcealed eagerness. When she entered Mrs. Baron's room she hesitated. "If you'll excuse me—" she faltered. "I'm looking for Mr. Victor."

Mrs. Baron sat more erect, the open volume in her lap. "Forming a little organization downstairs?" she asked.

"Some one's called for Mr. Victor. I wanted to see him."

"Very well. He's in the library." She nodded toward the adjoining room.

Victor was alone in the library. He was in the attitude of one who is about to write, but he was not writing. He was glowering at the paper before him.

Bonnie May

He sprang to his feet eagerly when Bonnie May appeared.

"I've been thinking about you," he said. "Flora has, too. We meant to come and find you before long and get you away from Mrs. Shepard. We didn't want to seem too eager, you know. We wanted to wait until the governess——"

Bonnie May did not wait for him to finish; indeed, he seemed to have difficulty about finishing. "Mr. Baggot has called," she said. "It's about a play." She was breathing uneasily. "And couldn't I sit with you and listen, please?" she added.

"Oh! Baggot! Baggot is one of my crosses, Bonnie May. Couldn't you shut the door in his face? It would be quite proper. He is one of those silly fellows who think they are destined to write great plays. Couldn't you go down and put him out?"

She looked at him steadily without a word. She was smiling a little scornfully.

"Very well. Suppose you go and ask him to come up—this time."

"And—do let me come too! They've often let me listen when new plays were being read."

"Such wanton cruelty!" He shook his head slowly, as if it were quite incredible. "Oh, well you may come, too," he added.

Mrs. Baron glanced up from her book again when Bonnie May and Baggot passed through the room. She spoke to Baggot in the most casual manner.

Bonnie May Opens the Door

Bonnie May concluded that he must be a somewhat frequent visitor. Mrs. Baron was quite frank in her indifference to him. "I think you'll find Victor in the library," she said. She glanced pointedly at the manuscript in his hand and frowned. "And would you mind closing the door when you go in?"

Mrs. Baron achieved her cruelties sometimes with such a naïve directness that they seemed to many people like a kind of high breeding.

Baggot stepped gingerly into the next room, followed eagerly by Bonnie May. He was closing the door softly when Baron greeted him.

"Hello, Baggot. Done something great again, of course?"

"Yes, I have!" retorted Baggot angrily. He wouldn't endure Baron's bad manners, no matter how he might receive the bad manners of Baron's mother. "You're going to say so, too. I've got the first act finished. I've only got to fill in the scenario of the other acts, and I've got the greatest play that ever came out of America."

Baron smiled wearily. "And I'm to listen while you read the first act of the greatest play, etc.?"

"Yes—and you're to agree with me, too. I don't see anything great in your sneering at me all the time!" He pulled up a chair and sat down so that his knees almost touched Baron's.

Obviously, they were a pair of young men on very intimate terms.

Bonnie May slipped into a remote corner of the

Bonnie May

room and climbed into a big chair. Her hand supported her chin; her eyes were luminous. She did not mean to miss a word.

And Baggot began to read. His face was almost tortured with nervous energy. He handled the pages as if they were in hopeless confusion, yet he brought order out of them swiftly.

The reading proceeded ten minutes, twenty minutes, half an hour. Baggot read with profound confidence and belief. His staccato tones fairly hurled the words of the play at his auditors. Baron had put away his cynic attitude. He had become deeply impressed. He had even forgotten that it was his favorite pose not to seem deeply impressed by anything.

Bonnie May was like one in a beautiful dream. She was not only listening to the play; she was living it.

And then her dream was broken in a manner which filled her mind with almost blank astonishment.

Mrs. Baron appeared in the doorway.

"Bonnie May," she announced, "I think it's high time for a little girl to be in bed."

CHAPTER VI

CONCERNING A FROCK

It might have been, and should have been, apparent to the several members of the Baron household that Bonnie May had been giving an admirable exhibition of self-repression from the moment she had entered the house.

A change came at last—when Mrs. Baron disturbed the reading of the play and announced, at nine o'clock, that it was "high time for a little girl to be in bed."

Mrs. Baron couldn't possibly have realized how Bonnie May had been accustomed to divide her hours between sleeping and waking. The guest had spent her life among player people, whose active hours begin at noon or later, and who do not deem the day ended until after midnight—sometimes far later than midnight. Nor had it been found convenient—or needful—by Bonnie May's fellow workers to make any exception to the rule on her behalf. She had been one of them, and she had fared well and pleasantly.

Thus it was that when Mrs. Baron appeared, somewhat like a bolt out of a clear sky, the child gave way to overwhelming rebellion.

Bonnie May

"I'm not used to going to bed at this hour," she declared bluntly. She arose and stood by her chair, like a soldier by his guns, as the saying is. And taking in the inexorable expression in Mrs. Baron's eyes, she turned appealingly to Baron. She was relying upon him to help her.

"Couldn't she—" began Baron weakly, and added, quite without conviction: "You know it's Saturday night, mother!" He was glad he had thought of its being Saturday, though he couldn't see why that should make very much difference. He really believed his mother's position was strong enough, if she had only gone about the matter more tactfully.

"Saturday night doesn't make any difference," declared Bonnie May, her rebellion now including Baron in its scope. "It just isn't a reasonable bedtime."

Baron felt ready to surrender. "Anyway, it won't be so bad just for one night," he ventured.

"Never mind, Victor," said Mrs. Baron pointedly. She addressed herself to Bonnie May. "What you've been accustomed to may not be quite so important as what you ought to become accustomed to," she said. "Come!"

The child sauntered thoughtfully from the room. She had been impressed by the fact that even Baron had not seemed surprised by the suggestion that she ought to go to bed. She was trying to comprehend the situation. After all, people who were

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not of the profession had ways of their own, she realized. If they had *all* decided to go to bed, she wouldn't have minded so much. But they were laying down a special law for her.

Rebellion triumphed again. In Mrs. Baron's room she halted. "Where am I to sleep?" she inquired.

"I think you heard me tell Mrs. Shepard to prepare a room."

"In the attic? Yes. But I'm not going to sleep there."

"Indeed, you are."

"I beg your pardon! Not under any circumstances!"

Mrs. Baron lifted her fingers to her lips and coughed—a very inexpert cough. "You'll have to do as I tell you, you know." She resumed a resolute march toward the hall, her hand pressed firmly against Bonnie May's back.

The child jerked away with a sense of outrage. She had never been treated so before.

"Truly, you'll have to obey me," repeated Mrs. Baron.

Bonnie May was alarmed; she quite lost control of herself. "Stop your kiddin'!" she said with a catch in her voice. She tried to say it playfully, but her self-possession was gone. Her remark had sounded simply offensive, indelicate.

"And I can't permit you to use such language, either!" declared Mrs. Baron.

Bonnie May

The dismayed guest pressed her hands to her eyes as if she were trying to think clearly.

Then she made a rush for the stairway!

Mrs. Baron put dignity aside long enough to pursue her, to seize her by the arm. She was becoming outraged, greatly indignant. "What do you mean to do?" she demanded, her voice trembling slightly.

"I'm quitting."

"You're——"

"I won't stay here!"

The distressed old gentlewoman tried to calm herself. "Where do you think of going?" she asked.

"Anywhere—to the theatres. Any company in town will be glad to have me. They will know who I am. They—they are the kind of people who will appreciate me!" The words were spoken in a tone of heart-break, of despair.

Mrs. Baron afterward confessed to members of her family that for the first time in her life she felt completely helpless. She was, in truth, a somewhat childish person in many ways, and she was not accustomed to any unpleasantnesses save those which she created for others.

At any rate, she swallowed with difficulty—and surrendered. "It's a very small point, after all," she said ungraciously. "Go into my room. Flora will look after you." She spoke coldly, all her interest seemingly withdrawn.

And just as the guest disappeared into Mrs.

Concerning a Frock

Baron's sitting-room, Flora came almost stealthily up the stairs.

"I wish you'd put that little limb of Satan to bed," she said. Flora saw that her mother's hand, on the balustrade, trembled.

"Where shall I put her?" she inquired.

"Anywhere! just so you get her covered up for the night."

Flora paused, her eyes uneasily seeking her mother's.

"I'm afraid you're angry with me, mother," she said humbly.

"With you? Certainly not."

Flora was puzzled. Her mother had long ago declared that Mr. Addis must not be accepted as a visitor. Did she know that he had just gone? She was about to enter her mother's sitting-room when something prompted her to turn.

"You knew Mr. Addis called, didn't you?" she asked.

Mrs. Baron's face flamed again. "Knew it? Certainly, I didn't know it! I've told Mrs. Shepard—I don't intend that he shall annoy you!"

"Oh, mother! He doesn't! And I think Mrs. Shepard didn't know, this time. Bonnie May went to the door and let him in. She called me down-stairs without telling me who it was." Flora surveyed her mother yearningly, yet with a kind of gentle courage. "I don't believe in hiding things from you, mother. But I was glad to see him."

Bonnie May

Mrs. Baron looked grimly toward her own door. "She let him in! Very well. Put her to bed!"

She descended the stairs with dignity. She must have been thinking of future victories rather than of past defeats.

When Flora entered the sitting-room she found Bonnie May standing in uneasy contemplation.

"Mother says I'm to put you to bed," said Miss Baron.

"Why didn't she go ahead and put me to bed herself?"

Flora perceived that the question was not wanting in sincerity. She decided to answer quite honestly.

"I think," she ventured gently, "you must have said something to vex her."

"Not at all. She tried to vex me. I behaved very properly."

Flora sighed and shook her head slowly; but she was smiling, too. She was wondering what it really was that had gone wrong. "Possibly you didn't want to obey her?" she ventured.

The child's brow puckered. "But why should I want to obey her?"

"Why—because she's going to be good to you, I'm sure."

"Well, I mean to be good to her, too—if she'll let me. And I don't ask her to obey me."

"But it's different. She's an old lady."

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"Well, I've got no patience with old people. It's all right, just as a *part*, but there's no use putting it on all the time."

"But, dear," implored Flora, drawing the child within the curve of her arm, "don't say that! I know you mean to be nice and kind, but truly you don't understand. We must all grow old some time—even you will get to be old."

The guest gave deliberate thought to this; then her expression became resolute. "Well, if they ever hang any gray hairs on me they'll have to catch me when I'm asleep—I'll tell you that right now."

Miss Baron was not encouraged to argue the point any further. She resumed the subject of going to bed.

"You know I'm to have his room—your brother's?" the guest insisted.

"Mother said you might sleep where you liked."

"Did she say that?"

"Almost exactly."

"Well, where is that attic room?"

"It's up one more flight of stairs—under the roof."

The child looked quite wistful and earnest, and then her words came with conviction. "I just couldn't sleep up there. Attics are where misers sleep, and poor children. It's where people die of hunger and cold. It's never the right kind of people. Come, let's go to his room."

And so they did.

Bonnie May

"You won't mind my helping you?" pleaded Flora.

"Helping me?"

"To undress, you know—and to be tucked in!"

The guest looked at her unresponsively. "But I've been used to doing that for myself," she said.

Flora quickly stooped and took her into her arms impulsively. "Dear child," she cried, her voice tremulous, "let me do it to-night! I think you'll love it—and I'll love it, too." She drew the perplexed face almost roughly against her own.

She did not wait to be refused. She hurried into the bathroom and busied herself; she was singing a little crooning song. There was also the noise of water splashing into the tub.

She reappeared presently. "The water is ready—for your bath, you know, and I've left one of my nighties there for you." She smiled happily. "Of course it will be too big. I'll make you some little ones soon."

The seeming perversion of the child asserted itself again. "I usually take my bath in the morning," she said a little stiffly; but she saw how the glad light in Miss Baron's eyes wavered, and she added quickly, "but it will be all right." And she went out into the bathroom.

When she reappeared after a rather long time she was smiling radiantly. She had on Flora's nightgown, soft and white, with pink ribbons. She held it daintily up before her feet, and glanced

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back at the train that dragged behind. "Isn't it lovely!" she said.

"It is, dear," said Flora.

She had turned the white coverlet and the sheet down. Now she watched the child scramble up into the bed. She wanted to help, but she refrained.

"Would you like me to tell you a story?" asked Flora.

Bonnie May looked at her swiftly, incredulously. "No!" she said. She burst out into riotous laughter. "I'm not an *infant*," she explained.

Flora flushed. "Very well," she said gently. Yet she lingered in the room a little while. She put some of Victor's masculine decorations out of sight. She adjusted the blind. She was about to extinguish the light when she looked again at the strange guest.

The child's eyes were fixed upon her widely, wonderingly.

"You lovely thing!" said Bonnie May.

"Good night, dear!" said Flora. And then she knew that the child wished to speak to her, and she went over and bent above the bed. "What is it, Bonnie May?" she asked.

The child stared before her in silence for a moment and then the words came. "I wished so much that she would love me!" she said. "I tried so hard. . . ."

Flora slipped her hand under the guest's head. "I'll tell you a secret," she whispered. "If she

Bonnie May

hadn't cared for you, she would have been quite polite; she would have been wonderfully gracious. She was ungracious and unkind because—because she loved you, dear. It seems absurd, doesn't it? But I know."

It was an absurd theory, perhaps; yet there was certainly needed some explanation of Mrs. Baron's course later in the evening.

The house became quiet after a time. The rumbling voices in the library ceased and Baggot, with meticulous circumspection, wended his way down the stairs and was gone. Later, Victor emerged from the library and disappeared for the night. Baron, Sr., came in and sat and smoked awhile—and retired. Flora sat in the sitting-room lingeringly, gazing pensively at a book without turning its pages, and at length she arose and kissed her mother's cheek and said good night.

And then Mrs. Baron tiptoed into another room and rummaged in a bureau drawer and found a gay piece of gingham which had been waiting its time to be useful. With this in her hands she returned to her sitting-room, and spread work materials upon her table. And with patience and fortitude and a kind of rapt self-absorption she worked far into the night.

The usual Sunday morning quietude of the mansion was disturbed somewhat when the family

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again assembled. An extraordinary event had occurred.

Mrs. Baron had sat up late the night before and had made a Dress.

In announcing the fact she had pronounced the word in such a manner that the use of the capital letter is fully justified. She displayed the Dress for the admiration of her son and her daughter, and her husband. And finally she generously relinquished it to Flora. "You may give it to her," she said rather loftily.

Bonnie May had not yet appeared.

Flora knocked softly on the guest's door and without waiting went into the room, displaying the new garment rather conspicuously.

"What's that?" inquired Bonnie May dubiously.

"It's a new dress for you."

"It was never made for me," affirmed the child with conviction.

"Indeed, it was. Mother sat up ever so late last night and made it for you."

"Well, that, of course, was a matter I should have been consulted about."

Bonnie May was now sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to make the toes of one foot come in contact with the floor. Miss Baron sat on a low chair in the middle of the room, the new dress spread across her knees.

"But you're glad, aren't you?" she asked.

"I'm glad in a way. I'm glad that anybody so

Bonnie May

disagreeable could really try to do you a good turn." Clearly, each day was a new day, with Bonnie May.

"But, dear child, mother won't seem disagreeable to you when you come to know her. It hurts me to have you speak so of her—truly it does. And I think she must have worked until she was very weary, making the dress for you."

"I appreciate all that," the guest hastened to explain, genuine compunction in her voice. "But you see, the dress isn't at all suitable."

"I'm sure you'll like it much better when you try it on."

"Take my word for it—it won't do."

Miss Baron felt for the moment as if she could have pounced upon the child and spanked her. But she noticed how one curl fell outside her ear, and how the eyes and voice were profoundly earnest, and how the attitude was eloquent of a kind of repentance before the fact.

And so she said: "Won't you do something for me that will please me better than anything else I can think of—something that will take only a minute?"

Bonnie May looked at her meditatively—and then began to laugh quite riotously! "You don't look the part!" she gurgled in justification.

"What part, please?" The question was put somewhat blankly.

"You're talking like a—oh, a Lady Clare, and you haven't even got your shoes buttoned up!"

Concerning a Frock

Miss Baron slowly regarded her shoes; then her glance travelled calmly to Bonnie May; then she rather dully inspected the dress that lay across her knees. Her countenance had become inscrutable. She turned away from the guest's scrutiny, and after a moment she arose slowly and left the room, carrying the dress with her.

She did not stop to define her feelings. She was wounded, but she felt sharp resentment, and she was thinking rebelliously that she was in no degree responsible for Bonnie May. Still . . . her sense of justice stayed her. She had the conviction that the child's remark, if inexcusably frank, was a fair one. And it had been made so joyously!

However, she meant to go to her mother with a request to be excused from any further humiliation as Bonnie May's handmaiden. But before she had proceeded half a dozen steps she began to fear even greater disaster, if Mrs. Baron should undertake to be the bearer of the rejected dress.

It would be a victory worth working for, if she could overcome the fastidious guest's prejudice.

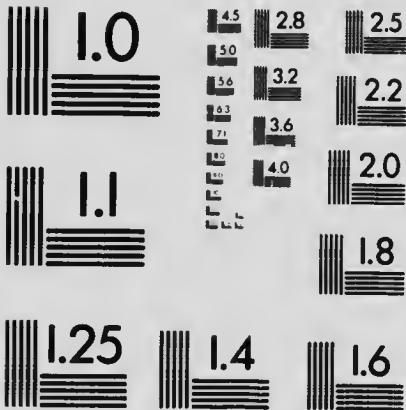
She went to her room and carefully buttoned her shoes and made other improvements in her toilet. Then she went back into Bonnie May's presence.

"I *was* untidy," she confessed. "I hope you'll excuse me." She was smoothing out the new dress. "You see, I only meant to wear my every-day shoes until after breakfast, and then put on my good shoes, for Sunday-school and church. And I've been very busy."



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Bonnie May

Bonnie May pondered this judiciously. "It's lovely of you to be so nice about it," she finally admitted, "but I'm afraid I don't get your idea. . . ." She frowned. "'Every-day shoes' and 'Sunday shoes,'" she repeated vaguely.

"Well?" said Flora persuasively.

"Don't you like to be as good on Saturday as on Sunday?"

"Why, yes—just as good, certainly." Flora was looking bewildered.

"And on Friday, and on other days?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, why shouldn't you wear your 'good' shoes all the week, then?"

"But people must look nicer on Sundays than on other days."

"I don't see why. If you only look nice, I don't see what's the good. And if you really are nice, I think the nice shoes might help all the time."

"What I mean is," persisted Flora patiently, "I don't like to work in my nice shoes." She brought this out somewhat triumphantly.

"That's funny. That's the very time I like to look my best. Nothing is as important as your work, is it?"

Flora was almost in despair. "I doubt if I ever thought of it in just that light," she admitted. "I'll think it over, if you'll try the dress on—and if you don't like it, off it comes!"

Concerning a Frock

"Well, all right." (This with a sudden calm which was not reassuring.)

Flora slipped the gingham dress into place, and patted it here and there with the air of one who admires, and viewed it with her head inclined a little, as women do in such a situation. "It's the dearest thing!" she said honestly. "Now come and see how you look."

The mirror was a little high. She lifted Bonnie May to a chair.

She was alarmed by what ensued. The child stared fixedly, with incredulous eyes in which a great horror grew.

"Oh, Lord!" she cried, clapping her hands over her eyes. "Take it off! Take it off!"

"What in the world is the matter?" demanded Flora.

"She asks me what is the matter! Oh, heavens!" Bonnie May jumped down from the chair and turned her back to the mirror. She was wringing her hands.

"I don't understand at all!" exclaimed Miss Baron hopelessly.

"You might!" was the emphatic rejoinder. "Do you suppose I want to play that kind of a part—here? It might do for the little sister of a sewing-machine girl, or a mountain-pink with her hair in knobs. But it wouldn't do for anything else. If you was only one of the populace, a costume like that would cause a scream! If you don't under-

Bonnie May

stand it, take my word for it. I can't wear it! I ask you to take it off!"

Miss Baron became very quiet. She became thoughtful, too. She had not failed to catch the drift of these exaggerated words. There *was* something prim, something rudimentary, about the dress. Color suffused her cheeks; she hung her head. She felt a forlorn inclination to laugh. From a vantage point behind the child she began to remove the gingham dress.

It *was* inappropriate. She had to admit it. It was a dress for a Gretchen; for the Cinderella of the kitchen, rather than the princess of the coach-and-four. It wasn't becoming at all.

CHAPTER VII

A SUNDAY MORNING

THE Barons were the kind of family that have just one morning newspaper left at their door on Sunday, and who believe that it contains everything that ought to concern them in any way—that whatever is published in any other newspaper is to be regarded with scepticism, or lightly discredited.

Yet on this particular Sunday morning Victor Baron arose early and intercepted the paper-carrier, and amazed that industrious youth by buying a copy of every journal he carried.

With this not inconsiderable burden under his arm he betook himself to the library and began an eager search for certain information.

He scanned all the advertising columns systematically, and then turned to the news departments.

A great heap of discarded "sections" grew about him as he progressed, and little by little a look of troubled anticipation vanished from his eyes. The last section of the last paper was cast away with an air of triumph.

He hadn't been able to find a single word about any child who was lost, or who had strayed, or who had been stolen!

Bonnie May

"Good!" he exclaimed, and he looked with great relief at the heap of papers about him, their splotches of color and assertive head-lines having no further interest for him. He smiled complacently.

In the meantime, in the sunny sitting-room upstairs, Flora had broken the news to Mrs. Baron—the news touching Bonnie May and the new dress.

It had been a very difficult thing to do, because Mrs. Baron was always at her worst on Sunday mornings.

It was on Sunday mornings that she felt most keenly the lapse of the neighborhood from former glories to a condition of sordid griminess. It was on these mornings that she fared forth to the old church, only three blocks away, in which the best people in town had formerly worshipped, but which had been deserted by nearly all the old parishioners.

It was Mrs. Baron's contention that it was indelicate, to say the least, for people to desert a church. There were things in the church life, she maintained, which could not be transplanted, and which constituted the very warp and woof of the domestic as well as the social foundations. She had come to regard herself as a kind of standard-bearer in this relationship, and she attended services somewhat ostentatiously, with the belief that she was not only lending her influence, but administering a rebuke as well. Ignoring the protests of her family, she had even consented to play

A Sunday Morning

the organ for the Sunday-school services. As a young lady she had learned to read music, as a matter of course, and though she possessed no musical intelligence, and had found it impossible to regain the old manual skill she had once possessed, she played the simple hymns with a kind of proud rigor, because she believed her participation in the services in this direction must impart an authority to the proceedings which the abler playing of some obscure individual could not have imparted.

Indeed, Mrs. Baron was a personage on Sunday mornings; a gallant general leading a forlorn hope proudly and firmly.

When Flora confessed to her that the dress had been rejected, she was too greatly amazed to say a great deal. She had also entered upon her stoic mood—her Sunday-morning mood.

“You see, she is simply determined not to get along,” she declared with finality. She took the dress into her own hands and regarded it critically. “Do you see how carefully the feather-stitching is done?” she demanded.

“Yes,” agreed Flora, “the—the feather-stitching *is* beautiful. But really, I don’t believe she is simply perverse. If you could have seen the dismay in her eyes—” Flora smiled at the recollection.

“I’ve seen women like that,” Mrs. Baron continued, “women who like to make difficulties; who go into hysterics over little things. It’s always just a lack of sense—that’s all it is.”

Bonnie May

"Yes—or temperament. I expect there's a good deal in what people call temperament. I didn't know children had it so much, but Bonnie May isn't like other children. Maybe she has a good deal of temperament."

They examined the dress together without any very definite purpose.

"She ought to know she can't go on wearing that silly thing she came here in," was Mrs. Baron's next comment.

"She must realize that," agreed Flora. She added casually: "I think something soft, with a little color in it, might please her. You might let me try next time."

This was the wrong note again. "As if I weren't capable of making a child's dress!" protested Mrs. Baron.

"I only meant it would be fair to divide the work," Flora explained gently. "I didn't mean I could do it better."

As if her anger had been effectually checked in that direction, Mrs. Baron hit upon another possible grievance. "And she's going to Sunday-school to-day," she affirmed in a tone which seemed to take account of difficulties. "We've done our best to dress her decently. And I don't intend to humor a little pagan as long as she's in a Christian household."

"But in that—that peculiar dress?" faltered Flora. She had a vision of Bonnie May in her fantastic old frock associating with the prim chil-

A Sunday Morning

dren of poverty who were now the mainstay of the Sunday-school.

"She may walk with Mrs. Shepard. People may believe she belongs to her, if they want to."

"Oh, mother!" There was something almost despairing in Flora's tone.

"It's the best we can do. I mean to do my duty—and I'm not willing to look ridiculous."

Again Miss Baron perceived breakers ahead. If the child conceived the idea that she was being commanded to go anywhere she would very probably develop new methods of resistance. If she were politely invited to accompany other members of the household to church, she might decide to be altogether gracious.

She entertained a lingering regret that the guest could not be persuaded to wear the new dress—in which, certainly, she would be conspicuous enough, but not quite in a flaunting fashion. She even thought of Victor, and wondered if he might not be able to prevail upon the child to accede to the wishes of her elders. But upon second thought she decided not to involve her brother in a phase of the problem which did not touch him. She suspected there would be other phases, more in his line, in due time.

In the meanwhile, the object of all this solicitous thought was leisurely preparing to make her appearance.

That she had no fresh raiment to put on was

Bonnie May

not particularly disquieting. The fact that it was a Sunday morning made no difference to her at all. Certainly she needed fresh linen, but this, she philosophically concluded, would be provided within another day or two. Her shoes were quite new and neat, and she was by no means ashamed of the dress which now constituted her complete wardrobe.

On a chair by her bed she made discoveries. There was a fresh towel; a little package which obviously contained a tooth-brush; a box of tooth-powder, and—crowning gift—a new hair-ribbon of adorable width and hue.

She tucked these things under one arm, and with her free hand she carefully gathered l'ora's long nightgown away from her feet. Then she started to the bathroom.

In the hall she paused to be sure that the way was clear.

Silence reigned, save for the murmur of voice down-stairs—far, indistinct.

The hall was glorious with indirect rays of the sun. It had wonderful spaciousness, too. Bonnie May gazed down the broad stairway, duskily bright and warm and silent, and her expression was quite blissful. She turned and looked up to the landing above—reached by a narrower flight of stairs. It seemed splendidly remote, and here the sunlight fell in a riotous flood.

Her sensations must have been something akin

A Sunday Morning

to those of a mocking-bird that inspects the vernal world in May. She released the folds of the night-gown and "paraded" to and fro in the hall, looking back over her shoulder at the train. She had put the garment on again, after Flora's advent with the gingham dress, primarily for the purpose of making the journey from her room to her bath. But there had been a distinct pleasure in wearing it, too. She thought it made her look like a fairy queen. She felt the need of a tinsel crown and a wand with a gilded star at its end.

She was executing a regal turn in the hall when her glance was attracted upward to some moving object on the landing above.

A most extraordinary ancient man stood there watching her.

Realizing that he had been discovered, he turned in a kind of panic and disappeared into regions unknown. His mode of locomotion was quite unusual. If Bonnie May had been familiar with nautical terms she would have said that he was tacking, as he made his agitated exit.

As for Bonnie May, she scampered into the bathroom, the flowing train suddenly gripped in her fingers.

Down-stairs they were listening for her, though they pretended not to be doing so. They heard her in the bathroom; later they heard movements in her bedroom. And at last she was descending the stairs leisurely a care-free song on her lips.

Bonnie May

She invaded the dining-room. Mr. Baron had been lingering over his coffee. The various parts of the morning paper were all about him.

"Good morning," was Bonnie May's greeting. She nodded brightly. "I hope I'm not intruding?"

"Not at all!" Mr. Baron glanced at her with real friendliness. It had not occurred to him that her dress was fantastic. What he had noticed was that her face was positively radiant, and that she spoke as he imagined a duchess might have done.

"You might like to look at the colored supplement," he added, fishing around through the various sections of the paper at his feet.

"I thank you, I'm sure; but isn't it rather silly?" She added deferentially: "Is there a theatrical page?"

Mr. Baron coughed slightly, as he always did when he was disconcerted. "There is, I believe," he said. He glanced over his shoulder toward a closed door. "I'm not sure Mrs. Baron would approve of your looking at the theatrical department on Sunday," he added.

"Really! And you don't think she'd see any harm in looking at the comic pictures?"

Mr. Baron removed his glasses and wiped them carefully. "She would probably regard the comic pictures as the lesser of two evils," he said.

"Well, I never did like to be a piker. If I'm going into a thing, I like to go in strong." She made this statement pleasantly.

A Sunday Morning

Mr. Baron put his glasses on somewhat hurriedly and looked hard at the child. He perceived that she was looking at him frankly and with a slight constriction at her throat, as was always the case when she felt she must hold her ground against attack.

"I rather think you're right," he said reassuringly. "I'm not sure I know how to find the theatrical page. Would you mind looking?"

But Flora interrupted here. She entered the room with the air of one who has blessings to bestow.

"You're invited to go to Sunday-school with us after a while," she informed the guest.

"You're very kind, I'm sure. What's it like?"

"Oh, there are children, and music, and—" Flora paused. She wished to make her statement attractive as well as truthful.

"A kind of spectacle?" suggested the guest.

"Hardly that. But there's somebody to tell stories. It's very nice, I think."

"It certainly sounds good to me. If they've got any good people I might like to get into it, until I find an opening in my own line."

Mr. Baron removed his glasses again. "Flora, would you undertake to tell me what she means?" he inquired.

Miss Baron pinched her lips and looked at him with a kind of ripple of joy in her eyes. "Isn't it plain?" she asked. She went out of the room

Bonnie May

then, and he heard her laughing somewhere in the distance.

He coughed again and turned to his paper, and so, for the first time in her life, Bonnie May was in a fair way of going to Sunday-school.

Victor didn't approve of the idea at all, when it was presently made known to him. He waylaid his mother in the dining-room at a time when there was no one else about.

"Why not wait until she can get some things?" he asked.

"Victor," replied Mrs. Baron, holding her head very high, "you're assuming that that extraordinary little creature is going to stay here. I assure you, she's not. This may be the only chance she'll ever have to place herself in the way of a helpful influence on Sunday. She's going to Sunday-school to-day."

"Governess," responded Victor, smiling steadily, "if you don't quit getting angry with me I mean to sue for separate maintenance. Mark my words." After which nothing more was said on the subject.

Victor betook himself to the library, however, and indulged in a moment of fidgeting. Breakers were ahead—that was certain.

It was forcing things, anyway. He took down his Emerson and turned to a passage which his mother long ago had pronounced a thing holding low heathen sentiments. He read:

A Sunday Morning

"And why drag this dead weight of a Sunday-school over the whole of Christendom? It is beautiful and natural that children should inquire and maturity should teach, but it is time enough to answer questions when they are asked. Do not shut up the young people against their will in a pew and force the children to ask them questions against their will."

He could not dismiss from his mind the picture of Bonnie May asking questions in her elfin yet penetrating way, and he realized that the answers she would get in that place of ordered forms and conventions might be very far from satisfactory to one of her somewhat fearful frankness and honesty.

But suddenly he smiled at the pictures he was drawing in his mind. "She seems pretty well able to take care of herself," he concluded.

He came upon the heaped sections of the newspapers he had examined. That reminded him. The newspapers were not the only source of information—nor perhaps the most likely source—so far as his immediate needs were concerned.

No, there was a certain visit he must make that morning.

A little later he emerged from the mansion and stood for an instant on the steps in the brilliant sunlight. Then he descended the steps and was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

STILL UNCLAIMED

BARON was on his way to see Thornburg.

On six days and seven nights Thornburg was one of the busiest men in town. But there was one day in the week when he liked to pose as a man of leisure. From ten or eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, and until the latter part of the afternoon, there were few people about the theatre to disturb him or to claim his attention. And during these hours it was his practise to lean back in the comfortable chair in his private office in the theatre and look through old letters and souvenirs, if there were no callers, or to exchange current gossip or old reminiscences with the people of his profession who dropped in to see him. Usually these were managers or agents who happened to be in town, and sometimes there were veteran players who were retired, or who were temporarily unemployed. And occasionally there were politicians who liked to keep on affable terms with the source of free passes.

When Baron entered the manager's presence he found that usually engaged person quite at liberty.

The little office was a place which was not without its fascination to most people. On the walls

Still Unclaimed

there were framed photographs of Jefferson as Rip Van Winkle, of Booth as Richard III, of Modjeska as Portia, and of other notable players. In many cases the pictures bore sprawling autographs across their faces, low enough not to hurt. Between these authentic ornaments there were fanciful sketches of dancing girls in extravagant costumes and postures, and a general ornamentation scheme of masks and foils and armor.

So complacent and open-minded was Thornburg when Baron appeared that the latter came to a swift, seemingly irrelevant conclusion.

"Nobody has claimed her! She's going to stay!" were the words that formed themselves in Baron's mind. The dull, monotonous aspects of the old mansion were to be changed. A new voice, like a melody rising above droning chords, was to greet his ears at morning and night. A thing of beauty was to take its place before the background of dull, long-established things.

No one had come to Thornburg to demand of him the child who had disappeared from his premises—Baron could read as much in the manager's expression. Wonderful! Truly wonderful!

"You haven't had any word yet?" he began.

Thornburg was used to Baron's ways. He had a friendly contempt for the dilettante young man about town and newspaper writer who could have made a place for himself, as everybody agreed, if he had chosen to do so, but who indulged himself

Bonnie May

by following his own ill-directed bent, merely because he was—well, because he was Baron—or a Baron.

“Not a word,” he replied, smiling indulgently, as if the matter were really not at all surprising.

Baron read the other's thought. “But a child like that!” he exclaimed.

“People are sometimes strange,” said Thornburg. “Now, if she had been a trained dog, or a cat with an unusual pedigree, or a horse with power to draw loads—then she would have been hunted up quick enough. But you see, she's only a child.”

Baron shook his head. He was rejecting all this as inadequate.

“She's still with you?” continued the manager.

“Yes. I'm hoping she'll remain with us.”

“She like it there?”

“Like it?” echoed Baron. He couldn't answer the question. He thought of something more pertinent to say. “It means that she will have a home—if we can keep her.”

Thornburg nodded slowly. “I don't think anything better could happen to her than for you to keep her,” he said. “I suppose she'll get the kind of care a little girl of her kind needs. If she's just a waif of the theatre she probably has a lot to learn about—oh, about life and real things.”

“Very likely,” Baron agreed. He added: “I was hoping you might throw some light on the case—as to who she is and where she came from.”

Still Unclaimed

Thornburg shook his head. "No, I couldn't," he said.

"About her coming to the theatre——"

"A woman brought her to the theatre and asked to be admitted. She belonged to the profession—the woman. We usually pass them in if there's any room. There happened to be just one seat left down-stairs—in the back row—and I told her she could have that. I supposed she would hold the little girl on her lap. I was provoked when I saw she had let her wander up into the box where you were. In fact, I spoke to her about it."

"And you don't know who the woman was—even by reputation?"

"Oh, there are thousands of such people—people who are 'of the profession.' Vaudeville people, circus performers, members of little stock companies, third-rate travelling troupes—they all ask for free seats."

Baron reflected. "I suppose," he said at length, "such people are often in financial straits?"

"My goodness, yes! Almost always."

"If she—this actress—had really wanted to find the child, she surely would have made inquiries here at the theatre before now, wouldn't she?"

"It would seem so—certainly."

"What I'm getting at is this: It looks a good deal like deliberate desertion, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I should say so."

"And that's what I simply can't believe," de-

Bonnie May

clared Baron. "Still," he added, "under the circumstances, I ought to be justified in not saying anything—in assuming that I have a right to keep what has come into my possession?"

"Well, for the time being, certainly. Of course, there may be developments sooner or later. She must belong to somebody; I mean, she must have a home somewhere."

"No, she hasn't."

"But of course you can't be sure of that."

"I am. She's my authority."

"You mean she told you that? It was probably a childish fancy—or a downright falsehood. You have to take into account all manner of possible circumstances."

"I think she told me the truth. She doesn't seem fanciful, in that way. She has the most remarkable sort of intelligence—of frankness."

Thornburg's eyes brightened with interest. "Has she, really?" he asked. There was an interval of silence and then the manager laughed. "It strikes me that you're an odd sort of a chap, Baron," he said. "What was your idea in taking her home—a stray child like that?"

"I don't think it was so very remarkable. She wanted to go with me, for one thing. She seemed quite delighted at the prospect of having a real home."

The manager turned this statement over in his mind so long that Baron supposed he was thinking

Still Unclaimed

of something else. He sat, his hands clasped behind his head, regarding one of the pictures on the wall, well over Baron's head. Then he aroused himself abruptly.

"What's your plan regarding her?" he asked.

"I don't know that I've got that far yet. She'll have the usual schooling and the sort of training that is customary. When she's grown— Well, it's hard to look far ahead, where a child like that is concerned. Of course, if Miss Barry ever turns up. . . . She would have claims we couldn't ignore."

"Who's Miss Barry?"

"She's the woman who brought Bonnie May to the theatre. If you know of an actress by that name——"

"I don't."

"She probably hasn't very much standing. From what Bonnie May said I judge she belongs to that vast army we never hear much about in the cities."

"It's like this, Baron," said the manager, with the air of a man who hasn't time for useless speculations, "I'm thinking, and I suppose you're thinking, that under the circumstances I ought to assume some of the responsibility for a waif who was lost on my premises. I'd want to be fair about it, you know."

"But I wasn't thinking anything of the kind," declared Baron.

Bonnie May

Thornburg frowned impatiently. "She'll be a burden to you, of course," he argued. "And there's clearly my share of the responsibility——"

"I didn't say anything about a burden. The word was yours. Of course I had to take her home with me. Or at least that's the way I felt about it. You simply couldn't turn a child like that over to an orphan asylum, or to the police. You would as readily think of asking some grand dame to turn a handspring as to expect Bonnie May to put on a uniform with a lot of other unclaimed children, and go through the usual order of childish occupations. Somebody has got to look after her in a different way: somebody who understands. But I wouldn't think of her being a burden any more than I would think of pigeons or flowers being a burden."

Again Thornburg laughed. "Still, most people are pretty willing not to have white elephants thrust upon them."

Baron regarded him steadily, in silence. There was a sort of threat in that—or a prophecy. And there was indicated that attitude of mind which sees no beauty in a generous deed. And these were reflections which Baron did not care to put into words.

The manager became uncomfortable under that glance. "You see," he explained, "I can't help thinking. . . . Is it possible that a little foot-light butterfly will be comfortable very long in a

Still Unclaimed

home like—in a home where everything is—is just so?” He flushed a little from the effort to avoid offensive inferences or words. “Won’t she be lonesome and out of place after the novelty of the thing passes?”

Baron liked that. It was frank and honest. “I don’t think she’ll be lonesome,” he declared. “Mother will see that she gets interested in things: in music, probably, or anything she manifests a taste for. She’s too bright to feel out of place, if she’s helped in the right way.”

“It might work out all right.” Thornburg nodded. “I’ll tell you,” he added, “suppose you let me help with the job.”

“Help!” echoed Baron. “You mean——”

“By writing a little check once a month.”

“That won’t be necessary. So far as the expense is concerned that will scarcely be worth considering.”

“Nonsense! You could use it, if only for extra dresses and trinkets. I’ve no doubt she’ll want a lot of things.”

That was exactly like a theatrical man’s ideas, Baron thought. But he couldn’t tell Thornburg that his mother would be sure to oppose anything that would tend to promote childish vanity, especially in the case of one who was already inclined to overestimate mere appearances. The gewgaws of the average petted and spoiled child would have to give place to simplicity and true childishness.

Bonnie May

Still, he didn't wish to offend Thornburg, whose suggestion had doubtless been based upon a generous impulse.

"It might be managed," he said. "We'll speak of that another time."

He arose and began to shape a casual exit. "There's nobody now to take *their* places," he said, indicating the portraits of Jefferson and Booth and the others.

"Not by a thousand miles," agreed Thornburg. His thoughts seemed to have been transferred easily to the players who were gone.

But when Baron emerged from the theatre and lost himself in the throng which the fine May forenoon had attracted from hotels and side streets, his face brightened with the joy which he felt he need no longer conceal.

"She's ours!" were the words that sang within him. "We're going to keep her!"

CHAPTER IX

A DISAPPOINTING PERFORMANCE

BARON looked at his watch twice as he climbed the stairs. Yes, the family had had time to return from church; but they had not done so. Mrs. Shepard was busy in the dining-room, but otherwise the house was unoccupied. Silence reigned in the upper regions.

Thomason, the houseman, was looking impatiently down from the upper landing; but Thomason didn't count. He was probably hungry. Baron realized that he, too, was hungry.

He went into the cheerful sitting-room and looked down upon the street, and instantly his attitude changed.

There they came! And something was wrong. Oh, plainly, something was wrong.

Mrs. Baron's head was held high; she was pale; her lips were compressed. There was nothing gracious in her carriage. She was marching.

By her side walked Flora, keeping step with difficulty. She appeared to be fighting off all realization of her mother's state.

Mrs. Shepard was no longer present to lend her support to Bonnie May. The faithful servitor had come home immediately after Sunday-school to

Bonnie May

look after the dinner, and the child walked alone, behind her silent elders. Her whole being radiated defiance. She was apparently taking in every aspect of the street, but her casual bearing was obviously studied; the determined effort she was making was not to be concealed.

Baron hurried down-stairs so that he might meet them in the hall, and engineer a temporary dispersement. He was affecting a calm and leisurely demeanor when the door opened and Mrs. Baron, followed by the others, entered.

There was an ominous silence. Bonnie May caught sight of Baron and approached him with only a partial concealment of eagerness and hurry.

Mrs. Baron and Flora ascended the stairs: the former leading the way sternly; the latter moving upward with wan cheeks and bowed head.

Baron led the way into the sitting-room, Bonnie May following. He pretended not to see or to apprehend anything unusual. "Well, what do you think of Sunday-school?" he began gayly.

"I think it's fierce!" This took the form of an explosion. "It wouldn't do even for one-night stands!"

Baron felt the need of an admonitory attitude. "Bonnie May," he said, "you should have discovered that it wasn't a play. It was something real. It's a place where people go to help each other."

"They certainly need help all right enough." This with a quite unlovely jeering laugh.

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"I wonder what you mean by that?"

"I suppose I meant the same thing you meant yourself."

Baron paused, frowning. "I meant," he explained patiently, "that they are people who want to be as good as they can, and who want to give one another encouragement."

The child was conscious of his wish to be conciliatory. She tried to restrain herself. "Well," she asked, "if they want to be good, why don't they just *be* good? What's the use of worrying about it?"

"I'm afraid it isn't quite so simple a matter as all that."

Bonnie May's wrath arose in spite of herself. She was recalling certain indignities. "I don't see anything in it but a bum performance. Do you know what I think they go there for?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"I think they go there to watch each other—to find out something bad about each other."

"Bonnie May!"

"I do! And I've had pretty near enough, too. You asked me and I told you. You're all asking me to do things, and asking me questions; and then if I don't agree with you in every way I'm wrong. That may look all right to you, but it doesn't to me. If I've got to take everything, I mean to be on my way."

Baron remained silent a full minute. When he

Bonnie May

spoke again his voice was persuasive, gentle. "I'm anxious to understand your difficulties," he said. "I'm anxious to have you understand ours. I'm sorry I criticised you. I'm sure you mean to be fair."

She looked at him with a light of gratitude in her eyes, a quiver of emotion passing over her face. She had an intense desire to justify herself—at least to him.

"Do you know what was the first thing they asked me?"

"Your name, probably."

"No, Mrs. Shepard told them that. *They asked me if I was a good little girl!*"

"But I don't see any harm in that. Why shouldn't they have asked you?"

"You don't! Do you suppose that I was going to tell them that I was—or that I wasn't? What nonsense! Are you 'a good young man'? How does a question like that sound?"

Baron pondered. "Well—" he suggested.

"Well, I wouldn't stand it. I asked her if she was 'a good old woman'—and the frowzy old thing stared at me just as ugly! She walked way down into the parquet without looking back. She'd been grinning when she asked me. I'll bet she won't grin like that very soon again."

Baron walked to the window and looked out dully, to gain time.

How extraordinary the child's attitude was! And

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yet. . . . He could understand that she might have been the only child in the troupe with which she travelled, and that her older companions, weary of mimicry and make-believe when their work was done, might have employed very frank, mature speech toward each other and their young companion.

He turned away from the window with a sigh. "Won't you take my word for it, Bonnie May, that these people mean well, and that one should speak of them with respect, even if one cannot speak of them with affection?"

"But they don't mean well. What's the good of stalling?" She turned until her back was toward him, and sat so, her cheek in her hand, and her whole body eloquent of discouragement.

An instant later she turned toward him with the first evidence of surrender she had shown. Her chin quivered and her eyes were filled with misery. "Did you tell the man where I was, so they can come for me if they want me?" she asked.

Here spoke the child, Baron thought. His resentment fled instantly. "Truly I did," he assured her. "I have been doing everything I could think of to help. I want you to believe that."

"Oh, I do; but you all put too much on me. I want to go back to where things are real——"

"Real, child? The theatre, and plays, and make-believe every day?"

Bonnie May

"It's the only thing that's real. You'd know that if you were an artist. It means what's true—that's what it means. Do you mean to tell me there's anything real in all the putting on here in this house—the way you hide what you mean and what you believe and what you want? Here's where the make-believe is: just a mean make-believe that nothing comes of. The theatre has a make-believe that everybody understands, and so it really isn't a make-believe, and something good and true comes of it."

Her eyes were flashing. Her hands had been clasped while she spoke until she came to the final clause. Then she thrust her arms forward as if she would grasp the good and true thing which came of the make-believe she had defended.

When Baron spoke again his words came slowly. "Bonnie May," he said, "I wish that you and I might try, like good friends, to understand each other, and not to say or think anything bitter or unkind. Maybe there will be things I can teach you. I'm sure there are things you can teach me! And the others . . . I honestly believe that when we all get better acquainted we'll love one another truly."

She hung her head pensively a moment, and then, suddenly, she laughed heartily, ecstatically.

"What is it?" he asked, vaguely troubled.

"I'm thinking it's certainly a pretty kettle of fish I've got into. That's all."

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"You know I don't quite understand that."

"The Sunday-school, I mean, and your mother, and everything. They put me in with a lot of children"—this somewhat scornfully—"and a sort of leading lady asked us riddles—is that what you call them? One of them was: 'How long did it take to make the world?'"

"But that wasn't a riddle."

"Well, whatever it was; and they caught one Smart Alec. She said, 'Forty days and forty nights,' and they all laughed—so you could see it was just a catch. As if anybody knew! That was the only fun I could see to the whole performance, and it sounded like Rube fun at that. One odious little creature looked at my dress a long time. Then she said: 'I've got a *new* dress.' Another looked at me and sniffed, and sniffed, and sniffed. She wrinkled her nose and lifted her lip every time she sniffed. It was like a kind of signal. Then she said: 'My papa has got a big store, and we've got a horse and buggy.' She sniffed again and looked just as spiteful! I had to get back at that one. 'Don't cry, little one,' I said. 'Wait until it's a pretty day and I'll come around and take you out in my automobile.' "

"But you haven't any automobile!"

"That," with great emphasis, "doesn't make any difference. There's no harm in stringing people of a certain kind."

"Oh, Bonnie May!" cried Baron reproachfully,

Bonnie May

and with quickly restored calm he added: "Surely one should tell the truth!"

"Yes, one should, if two would. But you can't afford to show your hand to every Bedelia that gets into your troupe. No, you can't," she repeated defiantly, reading the pained look in his eyes.

Baron knew that he should have expressed his disapproval of such a vagrant philosophy as this; but before he had time to frame a tactful response the child continued:

"Then the leading lady turned to me, thinking up another question. I made up my mind to be on hand if I had to sleep in the wings. 'Why were Adam and Eve driven out of the garden?' was mine. I said: 'Because they couldn't make good!' She looked puzzled, and I patted her on the knee. 'You can't put over anything on me,' I said. I think I shouted it. That stopped the whole show for a minute, and an old character man up near the stage got up and said: 'A little less noise, please.' Then your mother came back." (Baron had anticipated this detail.) "She had been taking the leading part in a little sketch up in front." (Teaching her class, Baron reflected, and smiled wryly in spite of himself.) "She had got through with her musical turn, and—well, I don't want to talk about her. She told me I must sit still and listen to what the others said. Why? I'd like to know. I couldn't agree with her at all. I told her I was a professional and didn't expect to pick

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up anything from a lot of amateurs. And then," she added dejectedly, "the trouble began."

Baron groaned. He had hoped the worst had been told. What in the world was there to follow?

"Your mother," resumed Bonnie May, "spoke to the woman who had been asking questions. She said—so that the children could hear every word—'She's a poor little thing who's had no bringing up. She'll have to learn how to behave.'"

She hung her head in shame at the recollection of this. For the moment she seemed unwilling to proceed.

"And what happened then?" Baron asked persuasively.

"Oh—I was getting—rattled! She had no right to work in a line like that."

"But what did you do?"

"I told her. . . . You know I *am* sorry, don't you?"

"Maybe you'd rather not tell me?"

"You'd better know. I told her that when it came to doing the nasty stuff I had seen pupils from the dramatic schools that looked like headliners compared with her."

Baron stiffened. "Goodness! You couldn't have said that!"

"Yes, I did. And I didn't have to wait to hear from any prompter, either. And she—you know she won't take anything. The way she looked!

Bonnie May

She said she was glad to say she didn't have any idea what I was talking about. Just a stall, you know. Oh, these good people! She called Flora and said I was to be taken into a corner, and that I was to sit there until we went home. And Flora led me into a corner and the others looked back as if they were afraid of me. They all sang after a while—a kind of ensemble affair. Flora held the music over and invited me to sing. I told her musical turns were not in my line. She just kept on holding the music for me—honestly, she's the dearest thing!—and singing herself. It was a crime, the noise she made. Isn't it awful when people try to sing and can't? As if they had to. Why do they do it? I felt like screaming to her to stop. But she looked as if she might be dreaming, and I thought if anybody could dream in that terrible place it would be a crime to wake them, even if they did make a noise. They had an intermission, and then a man down in front delivered a monologue. . . . Oh, me! Talk about the moving-picture shows! Why, they're *artistic*. . . .”

What, Baron wondered, was one to say to a child who talked in such a fashion?

Nothing—nothing at all. He groaned. Then, to his great relief, Flora appeared.

“Dinner is ready,” she said, standing in the doorway. There was a flush on her cheeks and an odd smile on her lips.

Baron took Bonnie May by the hand—he could

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not quite understand the impulse which prompted him to do so—and led her into the dining-room.

He saw that she bore her face aloft, with a painful effort at unconcern. He was glad that she was given a place next to him, with the elder Baron on her right, and Flora across the table from her.

He was dismayed to note that his mother was quite beside herself. He had expected a certain amount of irritation, of chagrin, but not this ominous, pallid silence. She avoided her son's eyes, and this meant, of course, that her wrath would sooner or later be visited upon his head.

He sighed with discouragement. He realized sadly that his mother's heaviest crosses had always come to her from such trivial causes! She was oddly childish—just as Bonnie May was strangely unchildlike. Still, she had all the traditions of propriety, of a rule-made demeanor, behind her. Strange that she could not have risen to the difficulty that had confronted her, and emerged from a petty predicament without so much of loss!

The meal progressed in a constrained silence. Bonnie May concerned herself with her napkin; she admired the design on the china; she appeared to appraise the dishes with the care of an epicure. And at last, unfortunately, she spoke.

"Don't you think, Mr. Baron"—to the master of the house—"that it is a pretty custom to converse while at table?"

Mr. Baron coughed. He was keenly aware that

Bonnie May

something had gone wrong; he was shrewd enough to surmise that Bonnie May had offended. But he was in the position of the passenger below decks who senses an abnormal atmosphere but who is unadvised as to the nature of the storm.

"I'm afraid I'm not a very reliable hand at small talk," he said guardedly. "I think my idea is that you ought to talk when you have something to say."

"Very good!" agreed Bonnie May, nodding brightly. She patted her lips daintily with the corner of her napkin. "Only it seems like chickens eating when you don't talk. The noises make you nervous. I should think anything would get by, even if you talked about the weather. Otherwise it seems just like machinery at work. Rather messy machinery, too."

Baron seized an oar. "Perhaps when people are thoughtful, or possibly troubled, it is a mark of good taste not to try to draw them into a conversation." He said this airily, as if it could not possibly apply to the present occasion.

"A very good idea!" admitted Bonnie May, quite obviously playing the part of one who makes of conversation a fine art. "But isn't it also true that people who are troubled ought to hide it, for the sake of others, and not be a sort of—oh, a wet blanket?"

The elder Baron's eyes twinkled in a small, hidden way, and Flora tried to smile. There was

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something quite hopefully audacious in the child's behavior.

But Mrs. Baron stiffened and stared. "Good gracious!" she exclaimed. After which she stirred her coffee with so much vigor that a little of it ran over into the saucer, and even the spotless tablecloth was menaced.

Baron undertook a somewhat sterner strategy. He felt that he really must not permit the guest to add to her offenses against his mother.

"It might be sensible not to talk too much until a closer acquaintance is formed," he suggested with something of finality in his tone.

But Bonnie May was not to be checked. "A very good thought, too," she admitted, "but you can't get better acquainted without exchanging ideas—and of course talking is the only way."

Baron leaned back in his chair with a movement resembling a collapse. Hadn't Thornburg said something about a white elephant?

"Wouldn't it be fine if everybody wore a badge, or something, so that you would know just how they wanted to be taken?" A meticulous enthusiasm was becoming apparent. Mrs. Baron was sitting very erect—a sophisticated, scornful audience, as she seemed to Bonnie May.

"Absurd!" was Baron's comment.

"Well, I don't know. You pretty near know without any badges. You can tell the—the mixers, and the highbrows. I mean when they are the real

Bonnie May

thing—people worth while. I would know you for a mixer easy enough. I don't mean careless, you know; but willing to loosen up a little if people went at you in the right way. And Flora would be a mixer, too—a nice, friendly mixer, as long as people behaved." Here she turned with a heroic, friendly appeal to Mrs. Baron. "And Mrs. Baron would be one of the fine, sure-enough highbrows."

"I think," began Mrs. Baron, suddenly possessed of an ominous calm; but the guest made an earnest plea.

"Oh, please let me finish!" she begged.

"Very well," said Mrs. Baron, "you may—finish."

"You know I understand about your part in that entertainment this morning. *You* don't belong in that crowd. It's like the queen who kissed the soldier. She was high enough up to do it and get away with it." She placed her elbows on the table and beamed upon Mrs. Baron with a look so sweetly taunting, and so obviously conciliatory, that the others dared to hope the very audacity of it would succeed. "Now don't deny," she continued, shaking an accusing finger at Mrs. Baron and smiling angelically, "that you're just a nice, sure-enough, first-class highbrow!"

It was done with such innocent intention, and with so much skill, that all the members of Mrs. Baron's family turned their faces toward her smilingly, appealingly, inquiringly.

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But alas! Mrs. Baron failed to rise to the occasion. She was being ridiculed—by a child!—and her children and her husband were countenancing the outrage. Her composure vanished again.

She pushed her chair back from the table angrily. Her napkin fell to the floor; she grasped the edge of the table with both hands and stared at Bonnie May in a towering rage.

"You little wretch!" she cried. "You impudent, ungrateful little wretch! You—you brand from the burning!"

She hurried from the room. In her blind anger she bumped her shoulder against the door as she went out, the little accident robbing her exit of the last vestige of dignity.

Bonnie May was horrified, crushed. She sat, pale and appalled, her eyes fixed on the doorway through which Mrs. Baron had vanished.

Then she brought her hands together sharply and uttered a single word:

"Hoo-ray!"

Every member of the family was electrified.

"Father!" expostulated Flora.

"Victor!" exclaimed the elder Baron.

And Baron, shaking his head sadly, murmured:

"Bonnie May! Bonnie May!"

CHAPTER X

THE WHITE ELEPHANT

MRS. BARON "took to her room," as the saying is. For an hour or more she might have been, to all intents and purposes, in some far country.

She left an awed silence behind her.

"If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go and talk to Mrs. Shepard a while," said Bonnie May, not without significance. The atmosphere had become too rarefied for her. She was turning from an inimical clan. She was obeying that undying instinct which impelled the cavemen of old to get their backs toward a wall.

Baron, Sr., prepared to go out. He turned to Victor and Flora as he took his leave, and his whole being twinkled quietly. He seemed to be saying: "Don't ask me!"

Flora stole up to her mother's room. She tapped at the door affectionately—if one can tap at a door affectionately.

A voice muffled by pillows was heard. "Making hay," it seemed to say. Flora frowned in perplexity. Then her brow cleared and she smiled wistfully. "Oh!" she interpreted, "'Go away.'"

She went to Victor again.

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"I suppose she'll have to go," she said, almost in a whisper.

"Oh, yes, certainly; yes, she'll have to go," agreed Victor firmly.

"And yet I can't say it's her fault."

"You might say it's her misfortune."

"Yes. . . . Isn't she—wonderful!"

"Oh, well, if two people simply can't understand each other, that's all there is to it."

"But *she* understands. She just talks too much. She won't realize that she's only a child."

"Oh, what's the use!" exclaimed Baron. He thrust his hands into his pockets and strolled through the house, up into the library.

He took down a copy of "Diana of the Crossways," and opened it at random, staring darkly at words which the late Mr. Meredith never wrote:

"Why couldn't she have made allowances? Why couldn't she have overlooked things which plainly weren't meant to be the least offensive?"

Obscurities, perhaps, but what does one expect of Meredith?

He meditated long and dejectedly. And then he heard his mother in the sitting-room.

He put aside his book and assumed a light, untroubled air. "Better have it out now," he reflected, as he opened the door and went into the sitting-room.

"Where is the Queen of Sheba?" asked Mrs. Baron.

Bonnie May

Baron dropped into a chair. "You know I'm awfully sorry, mother," he said. There was a singular lack of real repentance in his tone.

"I don't doubt that. Still, you might have taken me into your confidence before you brought that little limb of Satan into the house. I never heard of such a child. Never."

"But you know what the circumstances were——"

"Don't go into that again. I know that you brought her here, and that there wasn't any excuse for such a foolish action."

"But, mother!" Baron's face was heavy with perplexity. "She's such a little thing! She hasn't got anybody to turn to when she's in trouble. My goodness! I think she's done nobly—not whimpering once since she came into the house. She's probably—rattled! How would you or I behave if we were in her shoes?"

Mrs. Baron's eyebrows steadily mounted. "The point is, we're not in the slightest degree responsible for her. I want to know how we're going to get rid of her."

Baron had taken a chair directly in front of his mother. Now he arose and paced the floor. When he spoke his tone was crisp almost to sharpness.

"It isn't any more difficult now than it was yesterday," he said. "I can turn her over to the police."

Something in his manner startled his mother.

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She flushed quickly. "That's just like you," she protested. "What do you suppose people would say if we turned a motherless child over to the police? You ought to see that you've forced a responsibility on me!"

"Well, I should think it would be a question of what your own conscience says. As for 'people,' I don't see why anybody need know anything about it."

"And the newspapers and everything? Of course they would—everything."

"I could ask Thornburg to take her. He offered to help. I have an idea he'd be only too glad to have her."

"The theatre man—yes. And he'd dress her up in a fancy-ball costume, and encourage her in her brazen ways, and she'd be utterly shameless by the time she got to be a young woman."

Baron sat down again with decision. "Mother, don't!" he exclaimed. "Thornburg isn't that kind at all. He'd—he'd probably try to get at her point of view now and then, and he might allow her to have certain liberties. I think he's broad enough to want her to be good without insisting upon her being miserable!"

"Victor Baron!" warned his mother, and then she added with decision: "Then you'd better get him to take her—and the sooner the better."

"That will be all right. To-morrow. I'll call on him at his office to-morrow. I've never met

Bonnie May

his family. I'd consider it an intrusion to go to his house to-day, whether he did or not."

This, of course, was spoken disagreeably, and Mrs. Baron resented it. "You're very obliging, I'm sure," she said. "But after what I've gone through I've no doubt I can wait until to-morrow."

"No, it's not that she has disappointed me," responded Baron to a question by Thornburg the next morning.

They were sitting in the manager's office, and Baron had realized too late that he should have waited until after luncheon, or for some other more auspicious occasion, to have a confidential talk with Thornburg. There were frequent interruptions, and the manager had his mind upon the complicated business of amusement purveying, rather than upon the welfare of a waif who, as he conceived it, had become the hobby of a somewhat eccentric young man. A special rehearsal was in progress in the theatre, and the voice of the stage-manager, lifted in anger, occasionally reached them. It was a warm morning, and many doors were open.

"The fact is," Baron resumed, "I didn't foresee the—the complications. My mother has taken them into account, and it's her decision, rather than mine, that we ought to give her up."

Thornburg turned hurriedly to examine, and then to approve, the underline for a gorgeous poster

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of highly impressionistic design, which one of his employees had placed before him. When he turned to Baron again he presented the appearance of one who has lost the thread of a conversation.

"We were saying—oh, yes. You've got enough of—of what's her name. Well, what's your impression of her, now that you've had time to look her over?"

"I haven't changed my mind at all. I like her."

"The family made a row?"

Baron answered evasively. "It isn't quite a question of liking. It's something like trying to keep a canary in a suitcase, or putting a lamb or a kitten into harness."

Thornburg smiled. "Tell me just how she fails to square with the—the domestic virtues," he said.

"Her way of saying things—her views—she is so wholly unconventional," said Baron haltingly.

"She doesn't stand in awe of her superiors. She expresses her ideas with—well, with perfect liberty. You know children aren't supposed to be like that. At least my mother takes that view of the case."

He so plainly had little or no sympathy with the argument he made that Thornburg looked at him keenly.

"I see. She scratches the paint off!" interpreted the manager. He smiled upon Baron exultingly.

"You might put it so," agreed Baron, to whom the words were highly offensive. What right had Thornburg to speak contemptuously of the things

Bonnie May

which his family—and their kind—represented? He proceeded coldly. "I understood that you felt some measure of responsibility. I thought perhaps you might be willing to take her, in case we decided it would be difficult for us to keep her."

The manager pretended not to note the aloofness of the other's tone. "Now, if it were a matter of expense—" he began.

"It isn't. She doesn't seem at home with us. I think that states the whole case."

"How could she feel at home in the short time she's been with you?"

"Then I might put it this way: She doesn't seem congenial."

"Of course that's different. That seems to leave me out, as near as I can see."

"You mean," said Baron, "you wouldn't care to assume the responsibility for her?"

"Why should I?" demanded Thornburg bluntly. He glared at Baron resentfully.

"You're quite right, certainly. I seem to have had the impression——"

"I have an idea she's doing better with you than she would anywhere else, anyway," continued Thornburg in milder tones. "Why not give her her place and make her stay in it? I can't understand a family of grown people throwing up their hands to a baby!"

"I merely wanted to get your views," said Baron

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stiffly as he rose to go. "I didn't care to send for the police until——"

Thornburg got up, too. "Don't understand that I wash my hands of her," he hastened to say. "It might not hurt me any for the public to know that I didn't do anything, under the circumstances, but it would certainly be a boost for me to have it known that I went out of my way to do a good deed. Of course if you *won't* keep her——"

Baron turned and looked at him and waited.

"Look here, Baron, I'm going to be frank with you. When you took her home, I was sore at you. Especially after you told me something about her. I like them—children, I mean. You had taken her off my premises. I thought about the big house I've got, and not a child in it, and never to be, and I figured I might as well have taken her myself. But there's difficulties." His expression became troubled. "Once before I tried to take a child into the house and Mrs. Thornburg objected. It was my own child, too." He paused. "You know I've been married twice."

Baron's thoughts went back a few years to the somewhat unpleasant story of Thornburg's divorce from an actress with whom he had spent only a little more than one troubled year. The facts had been public property. He made no reply.

Thornburg continued: "I'm in doubt as to how my wife would look at it if I suggested that I'd like to bring this waif home. Of course, it's just

Bonnie May

possible she might not want to take a child of mine, and still be willing to take in some outsider. You know what strange creatures women are."

Baron waited. Was Thornburg being quite frank with him—at last?

"You see the difficulty. The—the wife is likely to suspect that Bonnie May is the same little girl I wanted to bring home before—that she's mine. She never saw the little daughter. I'd have to be careful not to make her suspicious."

"But the circumstances . . . I don't see how she could suspect anything," argued Baron.

"Not if I don't seem too much interested. That's the point. I'll tell you, Baron—you come out and see us. Me and my wife. Come to-night. State the case to us together. Tell the plain truth. Explain how you got hold of Bonnie May, and tell my wife your people have changed their minds. That ought to make the thing clear enough."

Baron, homeward bound, marvelled at Thornburg. It seemed strange that a crude, strong man should feel obliged to shape his deeds to please an ungracious, suspicious wife. He felt sorry for him, too. He seemed to be one of those blunderers whose dealings with women are always bewildering, haphazard experiments.

He had promised to call that evening—to lend his aid to the manager. It was the sensible thing to do, of course. They had to get rid of Bonnie May. Nothing was to be gained by debating that point any further. And yet. . . .

The White Elephant

When he reached home he was hoping that his mother might, on some ground or other, have changed her mind.

He speedily learned that she had done nothing of the kind.

Indeed, matters were a little more at cross-purposes than they had been the night before. Mrs. Baron had tried again to make a dress for the fastidious guest, accepting certain of Flora's suggestions, and the result of the experiment hadn't been at all gratifying.

Baron received the first report of the matter from Bonnie May, who was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs when he entered the house.

"You will please make no unkind remarks about my new dress," she began, assuming the attitude of a fencer, and slowly turning around.

The subject—and the child's frivolous manner—irritated Baron. "Really, I think it's very pretty and suitable," he said.

"Not at all. It's neither pretty nor suitable—though both words mean about the same thing, when it comes to a dress. But it's a great improvement on that first thing. I told your mother that. I told her I'd wear it until I got something better."

Baron sighed. "What did she say to that?"

"She was offended, of course. But what was I to do? I can't see that I'm to blame."

"But can't you see that mother is doing the best she can for you, and that you ought to be grateful?"

Bonnie May

"I see what you mean. But I believe in having an understanding from the beginning. She's got her ideas, and I've got mine. She believes you're Satan's if you look pretty—or something like that. And I believe you ought to be Satan's if you don't."

"But you do look—pretty." Baron spoke the last word ungraciously. He was trying to believe he would not care much longer what turn affairs took—that he would have forgotten the whole thing in another day or two.

He found his mother up-stairs.

"Well—any change for the better?" he asked.

"I'm sure I don't know. That depends entirely upon what arrangements you have made."

"I think Thornburg will take her. He's got to do a little planning."

"People sometimes do before they bring strange children into their houses," Mrs. Baron retorted.

Baron realized that his mother was becoming more successful with her sarcasm. He passed into the library. A mischievous impulse seized him—the fruit of that last fling of his mother's. He called back over his shoulder. "If the perverse little thing is quite unendurable, you might lock her up in the attic and feed her on bread and water until she leaves."

Mrs. Baron stared after him, dumfounded. "I'll do nothing of the sort!" she exclaimed. "She shall not be treated unkindly, as you ought to know. We owe that much to ourselves."

CHAPTER XI

HOW A CONVEYANCE CAME FOR BONNIE MAY— AND HOW IT WENT AWAY

TRUE to his promise, Baron set aside that evening to call on the Thornburgs.

As he emerged from the vestibule and stood for a moment on the top step he noted that the familiar conflict between the departing daylight and the long files of street-lamps up and down the avenue was being waged. In the country, no doubt, this hour would be regarded as a part of the day; but in the city it was being drawn ruthlessly into the maw of night. There was never any twilight on the avenue.

Already countless thousands of people had had dinner, and were thronging the avenue in that restless march which is called the pursuit of pleasure.

He slipped into the human current and disappeared just a moment too soon to observe that an automobile swerved out from its course and drew up in front of the mansion.

A youthful-looking old lady with snowy hair and with small, neatly gloved hands, pushed open the door and emerged. With the manner of one who repeats a request she paused and turned.

Bonnie May

"Do come in, Colonel," she called into the shadowy recesses of the car.

A gray, imposing-appearing man with a good deal of vitality still showing in his eyes and complexion smiled back at her inscrutably. "Go on," he said, tucking his cigar beneath the grizzled stubble on his upper lip, and bringing his hand down with a large gesture of leisurely contentment. "You'll be all right. I don't mind waiting."

And Mrs. Harrod proceeded alone to make her call.

By the most casual chance Mrs. Baron was standing at her sitting-room window when the car stopped before the house, and when she perceived that it was Mrs. Harrod—Amelia Harrod, as she thought of her—who was crossing the sidewalk, she underwent a very remarkable transformation.

So complete a transformation, indeed, that Bonnie May, who was somewhat covertly observing her, sprang softly to her feet and became all attention.

Mrs. Baron's face flushed—the child could see the heightened color in one cheek—and her whole attitude expressed an unwonted eagerness, a childish delight.

The truth was that Mrs. Harrod was one of the old friends who had seemed to Mrs. Baron to be of the deserters—one whose revised visiting list did not include the Barons. And they had been girls together, and intimates throughout their

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married lives—until the neighborhood had moved away, so to speak, and the Barons had remained.

It is true that, despite Mrs. Baron's fancies, Mrs. Harrod had remained a fond and loyal friend, though she had reached an age when social obligations, in their more trivial forms, were not as easily met as they had been in earlier years. And it may also be true that something of constraint had arisen between the two during the past year or so, owing to Mrs. Baron's belief that she was being studiously neglected, and to Mrs. Harrod's fear that her old friend was growing old ungracefully and unhappily.

Then, too, the Harrods had money. Colonel Harrod had never permitted his family's social standing to interfere with his money-making. On the contrary. The Barons were unable to say of the Harrods: "Oh, yes, they have *money*," as they said of a good many other families. For the Harrods had everything else, too.

"Oh, it's Amelia!" exclaimed Mrs. Baron, withdrawing her eyes from the street. She gave herself a quick, critical survey, and put her hands to her hair, and hurried toward her room in a state of delighted agitation.

She had not given a thought to Bonnie May. She did not know that the child slipped eagerly from the room and hurried down the stairs.

Bonnie May was, indeed, greatly in need of a diversion of some sort. Not a word had been said to her touching the clash that had occurred at the

Bonnie May

table during the Sunday dinner. She did not know that the machinery necessary to her removal from the mansion had been set in motion; but she had a vague sense of a sort of rising inflection in the atmosphere, as if necessary adjustments were in the making. Perhaps her state of mind was a good deal like that of a sailor who voyages in waters which are known to be mined.

However, she liked to go to the door to admit visitors, in any case. There may have been, latent in her nature, a strong housekeeping instinct. Or, perhaps, there seemed a certain form of drama in opening the door to persons unknown—in meeting, in this manner, persons who were for the time being her “opposites.” She assured herself that she was saving Mrs. Shepard from the trouble of responding from the kitchen; though she realized clearly enough that she was actuated partly by a love of excitement, of encounters with various types of human beings.

On the present occasion she had opened the door and stepped aside, smiling, before Mrs. Harrod had had time to touch the bell.

“Come in,” she said. And when the visitor had entered she closed the door softly. “Will you wait until I make a light?” she asked. “I’m afraid we’ve all forgotten about the light.” The lower rooms had become quite gloomy.

She had climbed upon a chair in the drawing-room, and touched a match to the gas-burner before

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she could be questioned or assisted, and for the moment the caller was only thinking how peculiar it was that the Barons went on relying upon gas, when electricity was so much more convenient.

"Please have a seat," Bonnie May added, "while I call Mrs. Baron." She turned toward the hall. "Shall I say who it is?" she asked.

Mrs. Harrod had not taken a seat. When the light filled the room child and woman confronted each other, the child deferential, the woman smiling with an odd sort of tenderness.

"Who *are* you?" asked the visitor. Her eyes were beaming; the curve of her lips was like a declaration of love.

"I'm Bonnie May." The child advanced and held out her hand.

Mrs. Harrod pondered. "You're not a—relative?"

"Oh, no. A—guest, I think. Nothing more than that."

Mrs. Harrod drew a chair toward her without removing her eyes from the child's face. "Do sit down a minute and talk to me," she said. "We can let Mrs. Baron know afterward. A guest? But you don't visit here often?"

"This is my first visit. You see, I have so little time for visiting. I happen not to have any—any other engagement just now. I was very glad to come here for—for a while."

"You haven't known the Barons long, then?"

Bonnie May

"In a way, no. But you know you feel you've always known really lovely people. Don't you feel that way?" She inclined her head a little; her lips were slightly parted; her color arose. She was trying very earnestly to meet this impressive person upon an equal footing.

"I think you're quite right. And—how did you meet them? I hope you don't mind my asking questions?"

"Not in the least. I met Mr. Victor at a—a kind of reception he was attending. He was lovely to me. He asked me to meet his mother."

"How simple! And so you called?"

"Yes. That is, Mr. Victor came and—and brought me. It was much pleasanter, his bringing me."

She had wriggled up into a chair and was keeping clear, earnest eyes upon the visitor. She was recalling Mrs. Baron's agitation, and she was drawing conclusions which were very far from being wholly wrong.

"I think Victor's a charming young gentleman," declared Mrs. Harrod. "He's always doing something—nice."

"Yes," responded Bonnie May. She had observed that the visitor paused before she said "nice." Her eyes were alertly studying Mrs. Harrod's face.

"And your name is Bonnie May. Is that the full name, or——"

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"Yes, that's the full name."

Mrs. Harrod pondered. "You're not of the Prof. Mays, are you?"

"Why, I'm of—of professional people. I'm not sure I'm of the Mays you're thinking about." She edged herself from her chair uneasily. "I hope I haven't forgotten myself," she added. "I'm sure I should have let Mrs. Baron know you are here. I think you didn't say what the name is?"

"I'm Mrs. Harrod. I hope you'll remember. I would be glad if you'd be a friend of mine, too."

The child's dilemma, whatever it had been, was past. She smiled almost radiantly. "I'm very glad to have met you, Mrs. Harrod," she said. She advanced and extended her hand again. "I truly hope I'll have the pleasure of meeting you again."

Then she was off up the stairs, walking sedately. It had meant much to her that this nice woman, who was clearly not of the profession, had talked to her without patronizing her, without "talking down" to her.

A strange timidity overwhelmed her when she appeared at Mrs. Baron's door. "It's Mrs. Harrod," she said, and there was a slight catch in her voice. "I mean, Mrs. Harrod has called. I let her in."

Mrs. Baron, standing in her doorway, was fixing an old-fashioned brooch in place. She flushed and there was swift mistrust in her eyes. "Oh!" she

Bonnie May

cried weakly. The sound was almost like a moan. "I thought Mrs. Shepard——"

"I didn't tell her I was—I didn't tell her who I was. I thought you would rather I didn't. I was just nice to her, and she was nice to me."

She hurried away, then, because she wanted to be by herself. For some reason which she could not understand tears were beginning to start from her eyes. Mrs. Baron had not been angry, this time. She had seemed to be ashamed!

She did not know that the old gentlewoman looked after her with a startled, almost guilty expression which gave place to swift contrition and tenderness.

Mrs. Baron did not descend the stairs. She was about to do so when Mrs. Harrod appeared in the lower hall.

"Don't come down!" called the latter. "I mean to have my visit with you in your sitting-room." She was climbing the stairs. "I don't intend to be treated like a stranger, even if I haven't been able to come for such a long time." Shadows and restraints seemed to be vanishing utterly before that advancing friendly presence. And at the top of the flight of stairs she drew a deep breath and exclaimed:

"Emily Boone, *who* is that child?" She took both Mrs. Baron's hands and kissed her. "I told the colonel I simply wouldn't go by without stopping. He had an idea we ought to go to see—

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what's the name of the play? I can't remember. It gave me a chance to stop. I seem never to have the opportunity any more. But do tell me. About the child, I mean. Do you know, I've never seen such a perfect little human being in my life! She's so lovely, and so honest, and so unspoiled. *Who is she?*"

Mrs. Baron felt many waters lift and pass. Bonnie May hadn't done anything scandalous, evidently. And here was her old friend as expansive, as cheerfully outspoken as in the days of long ago.

She found herself responding happily, lightly.

"A little protégée of Victor's," she said. "You know what a discoverer he is?" They had entered the sitting-room. Mrs. Baron was thinking again how good it was to have the old bond restored, the old friend's voice awaking a thousand pleasant memories.

But as Mrs. Harrod took a seat she leaned forward without a pause. "Now do tell me about that—that cherub of a child," she said.

In the meantime, Victor Baron was experiencing something like a surprise to discover that Thornburg, the manager, seemed a new, a different, sort of person, now that he was in his own home. He had quite the air of—well, there was only one word for it, Baron supposed—a gentleman.

The Thornburg home was quite as nice, even in the indefinable ways that count most, as any home Baron was acquainted with. There was an impres-

Bonnie May

sion of elegance—but not too much elegance—in the large reception-room. There was a general impression of softly limited illumination, of fine yet simple furniture. The walls had a kind of pleasant individuality, by reason of the fact that they were sparsely—yet attractively—ornamented.

A grandfather's clock imparted homeliness to one end of the room; there was a restful suggestion in the broad fireplace in which an enormous fern had been installed. Baron's glance also took in a grand piano of a quietly subdued finish.

Mrs. Thornburg alone seemed in some odd way out of harmony with the fine, cordial picture in which Baron found her. She was a frail, wistful woman, and because her body was ailing, her mind, too—as Baron speedily discovered—was not of the sound, cheerful texture of her surroundings.

“Ah, Baron!” exclaimed Thornburg, advancing to meet his guest as the latter was shown into the room. “I'm glad to see you here.”

As he turned to his wife, to introduce the visitor, Baron was struck by something cautious and alert in his manner—the manner of a man who must be constantly prepared to make allowances, to take soundings. He presented an altogether wholesome picture as he looked alternately at his wife and his guest. His abundant, stubborn gray hair was in comfortable disorder, to harmonize with the smoking-jacket he wore, and Baron looked at him more than once with the uncomfortable sense

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of never having really known him before. He thought, too, how this brusque, ruddy man seemed in a strange fashion imprisoned within the radius of an ailing wife's influence.

"Mr. Baron is the man who carried that little girl out of the theatre the other day," explained Thornburg. He turned again to Baron with a casual air: "Do you find that your people still want to let her go?"

He was playing a part, obviously; the part of one who is all but indifferent. Mrs. Thornburg scrutinized the visitor's face closely.

"Yes, I believe they do," replied Baron.

"I've been talking to Mrs. Thornburg about the case. She understands that I feel a sort of responsibility. I think I've about persuaded her to have a look at the little girl."

Mrs. Thornburg seemed unwilling to look at her husband while he was speaking. Baron thought she must be concealing something. She was gazing at him with an expression of reproach, not wholly free from resentment.

"Hasn't the child any relatives?" she asked. She seemed to be making an effort to speak calmly.

"I really can't answer that," said Baron. "She seems not to have. She has told me very little about herself, yet I believe she has told me all she knows. She has spoken of a young woman—an actress—she has travelled with. There doesn't ap-

Bonnie May

pear to have been any one else. I believe she never has had a home."

Mrs. Thornburg withdrew her gaze from him. She concerned herself with the rings on her thin, white fingers. "How did you happen to be with her in the theatre?" she asked.

"I was in one of the upper boxes. I don't know how she came to be there. I believe she couldn't find a seat anywhere else."

"And you'd never seen her before?"

"Never."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Both Thornburg and Baron were looking interestedly at Mrs. Thornburg, who refused to lift her eyes. "I wonder how you happened to take her to your home?" she asked finally.

Baron laughed uneasily. "I'm wondering myself," he said. "Nobody seems to approve of what I did. But if you could have seen her! She's really quite wonderful. Very pretty, you know, and intelligent. But that isn't it, after all. She is so charmingly frank. I think that's it. It's unusual in a child."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Mrs. Thornburg. "Unusual in any one, I should say."

"Why, perhaps it is," agreed Baron simply. He was not a little puzzled by something in Mrs. Thornburg's manner.

"And why don't you want to keep her?" she wanted to know.

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"We meant to. But it turns out that she and my mother are—well, antagonistic."

"That's unfortunate, isn't it? Please pardon me—you see, I'm really handicapped. But—what kind of woman is your mother?" She put the question so softly that it did not seem offensive.

Baron hesitated. "Perhaps it will explain if I say that she is elderly? There haven't been any children in the house for a good many years. She believes—what is the familiar saying?—that children ought to be seen and not heard."

Mrs. Thornburg hesitated. "That wouldn't be quite the reason," she said. "Your mother is—is orthodox, I suspect, in her friendships and ways. I'm sure you see what I mean."

"Yes," admitted Baron. "I think you are getting closer to the facts than I did."

A pretty, delicate hue warmed the woman's face, and her voice softened almost to tenderness. "I think I know," she went on. "The little girl of the stage, out of some unknown place in Bohemia—she must seem quite disturbing, hopelessly out of harmony. . . ."

"You put the case much better than I did. Yet you know all that's scarcely fair to Bonnie May. She's not really bold and impertinent, in the usual sense of those words. She hasn't had the kind of training other children have. She has never associated with other children. You can see that instantly. She assumes that she has the same

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right to her opinion that older people have to theirs. She never means to offend. I have an idea she's really quite affectionate. I have an idea if you once won her over——”

Mrs. Thornburg turned toward her husband and leaned forward in her chair, her eyes filled with a soft, generous impulse. When she spoke her voice vibrated with feeling.

“Bring her home!” she said.

Baron fancied there was an expression of triumph in the manager's bearing. “You mean now—to-night?” he asked.

“Why not to-night? I'm eager to have her; really eager, now that I've decided.”

“It's quite simple,” declared Thornburg. “I suppose you'll have to—to get a few things ready?”

Her whole being became tremulous—she who had had no children of her own, and who knew nothing about them. “Nothing to-night, to speak of. To-morrow. . . .” She clasped her hands and looked into vacancy, as if visions were coming to her.

But Thornburg was already in an adjoining room at the telephone, ordering his machine.

Baron regarded Mrs. Thornburg thoughtfully. He was surprised and touched by her intensity. Then she looked at him, mutely appealing. There was a long moment during which two minds tried to meet across a barrier of emotion and a lack of mutual knowledge. Then Mrs. Thornburg spoke.

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"You know," she explained, "we've both been disappointed, deeply disappointed, because we hadn't any of our own."

When Thornburg's automobile stopped before the Baron mansion, half an hour later that evening, and the manager and Baron got out, something happened.

Mrs. Baron, her gray hair stirring slightly in the spring breeze, stood on the front steps for all the world like an alert sentinel.

"Well, Victor?" she demanded, as her son advanced toward her. Her voice was sternly challenging.

"This gentleman has come to take Bonnie May away," replied her son. He derived a certain satisfaction from her disturbed state.

"Where to?"

"To her new home, with _____ and Mrs. Thornburg."

"Do you mean you've brought that machine to take her away to-night?"

"Why, yes—certainly."

"Well, you can just send it away. You won't need it to-night."

"I don't believe I understand, mother!"

Baron had approached the lowest step and Thornburg had taken a position close to him. Mrs. Baron, from her superior height, frowned down upon them as if they were two kidnappers who must be held at bay.

Bonnie May

"You probably don't," replied Mrs. Baron. "It isn't necessary that you should, either. But you'll grasp my meaning when I tell you that child shall not be taken away in the dead of night, as if she were being stolen, and she shall not leave this house until she has been decently clothed and made ready to go. I never heard of such an outrageous thing in my life." She turned with fear, yet with severity, toward Thornburg. When she spoke again it might have seemed that she regarded the manager as a kind of trained wolf over whom her son might possess an influence. "Victor, tell him to go away!" she commanded. "When I want him to come back I'll let you know."

She turned with the air of a queen who had been affronted. In an instant she had disappeared. The door had been quite unmistakably slammed behind her.

CHAPTER XII

RELATES TO THE PLAYING OF PARTS

MUCH light is thrown upon the character of Victor Baron when it is said that he was the kind of young man who likes to sit in an attic when the rain is falling.

Such a young man may possess many high virtues, certainly; but he can scarcely hope to escape occasional contact with what is called the world's cold shoulder. He is clearly not the sort of person who knows what magic there is in the matter of percentages and other such progressive and acquisitive sciences.

We now encounter this peculiar young man in his attic room, on an afternoon when the rain was falling steadily.

Days had passed since Mrs. Baron had driven the manager, Thornburg, from her front door. Something like a fixed status in the case of Bonnie May had been brought about. Seemingly, she had become a permanent member of the Baron household.

Yet Baron was not happy. Having performed his duty in solving one problem, he had now passed on to another, an older problem.

Bonnie May

There was the fact of his aimless existence staring him in the face; the fact that he had been home from the university over a year now, and that as yet he had chosen no plough to the handles of which he meant to set his hands.

He did write newspaper writing when the spirit moved him—articles and reviews which were often quite courageously accepted—and sometimes even urgently solicited—but which were still subjected to a measuring process in the accounting room of the newspaper offices, and which were only meagrely profitable.

To be sure, his needs were quite simple. He made no contributions to the up-keep of the household. He kept his tailor's bills paid with a reasonable degree of promptitude. Usually, too, he had funds enough for books and other means of recreation. Still, there were occasions when he had to go to his mother for assistance, and this practise he was compelled to contemplate with utter disfavor.

It is true that he never asked his mother for Money. The Barons pronounced the word money as if it were spelled with a capital letter, like certain other more or less unsavory names—Lucretia Borgia, New Caledonia, Christian Science, Prussianism, or Twilight Sleep. He used to ask her, when need arose, if she had any street-car-fare lying about. And she would put her index-finger to her forehead and meditate, and then remember sud-

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denly that there was some in her work-basket on the centre-table, or under something or other on the sideboard. A burglar would have had a discouraging experience in the mansion; not because there was never anything to steal, but because what money there was was always placed lightly in such unpromising places.

"I really ought to get down to business," concluded Baron, sitting in his attic—though the phrase was inept, since business was another word which the Barons pronounced as if it were spelled with a capital letter.

The place was depressingly quiet. The houseman, Thomason, might be in his room, which adjoined Baron's; but Thomason never made any noise. He was almost uncannily quiet at all times. The door between the two rooms was never opened. Both opened upon the hall, and when Thomason wished to attend to his duties he descended to the floor below, where a back stairway afforded egress to the lower regions where his more active interests lay.

Yes, the quietude was just now quite depressing. Sitting by an open window, Baron looked out upon the sombre vista of back street, which was uninviting at best, but which now presented a doubly depressing aspect in the monotonously falling rain.

An intercepted picture of a small park was visible several blocks away. The Lutheran church, whose bell was forever tinkling a message of another time

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and place, was in sight, and so was the shoulder of a brewery.

Closer at hand men and women were hurrying in various directions, seeking escape from the rain. They had finished their day's work and were now going home to enjoy their well-earned bread and meat and rest. Over there where the wind currents of two streets met two small boys stood beneath a dilapidated umbrella and permitted a torrent of muddy water in the gutter to run over their bare feet. A beer-driver, partly sheltered under the hood of his dray, drove rumbly over the cobblestones toward the near-by brewery. On the ends of passing street-cars home-going crowds were trying to escape the falling rain.

All this constituted a back-street picture which none of the Barons observed as a rule. It was the habit of the family to confine their outlook to the front view. But just now Baron was experiencing a frame of mind which made the humble side of life significant and even fascinating.

Still, he was glad to have his solitude invaded when, some time later, he felt a light touch on his shoulder. Unheard and unobserved, Bonnie May had stolen into the room. She had "caught" him in a brown study.

"Don't you think you've been studying your part long enough?" she asked. She was looking at him with cheerful comprehension.

"What part?" he asked.

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"Well, of course I don't know exactly, except that it would be *your* part—whatever that is. That's what people always do when they're alone, isn't it? They think how certain words will sound, or how they will do this or that. That's studying a part, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes—in a way."

She pulled a chair to the window, close to him, and climbed into it. "There's really something funny about it," she added with a reminiscent manner.

"Funny?"

"I mean about people and their parts. You know, mostly people aren't thinking at all about how to do their own parts better. They're imagining themselves in some rôle way beyond them. When they think they are ambitious they're mostly just sore because somebody is doing better than they are. It's jealousy—not ambition. My goodness, the little parts are important enough!"

Baron regarded her in silence. Then—"but don't you think everybody ought to want to advance?" he asked.

"Oh, well—yes; but think how a production would be if the little parts—even the populace—were done wrong! If I had only one line, I'd want to believe it was as important as anything in the play."

Baron tried to apply that philosophy to his own "part," but he had to admit that the result was not at all satisfactory.

Bonnie May

"Anyway," she added, "if you do things the way your audience wants you to do them, I'll bet the big parts will come fast enough."

"The audience!" echoed Baron. "I'd want a higher standard than that. I'd want to—to play my part the way I thought it should be done. I wouldn't be satisfied just with pleasing the audience."

"Oh, but that's the wrong idea. I've seen people like that. They never were what you'd call artists. Believe me, the audience is the best judge."

Baron, seeking for a symbol, believed there was no hope of finding it in this. His mind wandered, and when he brought it back to the child who sat before him she was talking of her own problem in a way which did not touch his at all.

"I think it's the chance of my life," she was saying, "my being here with you all."

"A chance—for what?" he asked.

"Oh, to pick things up. You know I can't always be a Little Eva. I'll be too old for that after a while. And then it will be handy for me to have a little—a little class."

"Class!" exclaimed Baron. "Class?"

He had been arguing that the one thing wrong with his way of thinking and living was that he and his family had attached a silly importance to the class idea, and that it had prevented him from learning to be active and useful in ways that counted in the world in which he had to live.

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"It's a good thing," defended Bonnie May. "It's needed in all the best plays. And you can't get it just by going to the wardrobe mistress, either. It's something that's got to be *in* you. In order to do it right, you've pretty near got to have the goods."

She couldn't understand why Baron had spoken with such emphasis—with such resentment.

"Class," mused Baron to himself. He looked intently at this child who did not know where she had been born—who knew nothing even about her parentage.

But she had turned to a happier memory. "You know you can't play the part of Little Eva very long, even when you begin quite early. And I was just a little bit of a thing when I played it first." She laughed heartily. "I couldn't even speak plain. I used to say 'U'kle Tom'! How they laughed at me! 'U'kle Tom!' It's really a hideous word, isn't it? 'Uncle,' and 'aunt,' too. You can see that the man who framed up those words never thought very highly of uncles and aunts. Just compare those words with 'father' and 'mother'! Aren't they lovely? Father!" she spoke the word musingly. "Father!" Her body drooped forward slightly, and her face was pitched up so that she was gazing into space. "Beautiful words, and mother! . . . mother!" Her voice had become a yearning whisper.

Baron touched her shoulders with gentle hands. "Don't, child!" he implored her.

Bonnie May

She aroused herself as from a dream. Her eyes brightened. She looked at him searchingly. "You thought . . . I believe I was, too!"

She sprang to her feet. "I really do intend to pick up a lot of things while I am here," she added briskly. She walked across the floor. "An imitation of a person of class," she said. She moved with studied elegance. "You see," she exclaimed, turning to him, "I can't do it at all right! I ought to beat that." She returned to her starting-point. "See if I do it any better," she said.

Mrs. Baron appeared in the doorway, but neither Baron nor the child saw her. Again Bonnie May crossed the room. This time she assumed a slightly careless air, and looked airily at imaginary objects to right and left. Her movement was slightly undulating. She turned to Baron suddenly: "What you have to do is to be really proud, without thinking about it. I know how it ought to be done, but it's hard to get the hang of it. If you don't get it just right you're likely to look like a saleslady." She discovered Mrs. Baron, who stood rather scornfully in the doorway.

"Oh, Mrs. Baron!" she exclaimed. She was somewhat dismayed. She thought of adopting a conciliatory course. "You could show us just what I mean, if you would," she said.

"I came to say that dinner is ready," said Mrs. Baron. "Could show you what?"

"Won't you please come here—quite over to this

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end of the room? Now please go out. We'll come right away."

Mrs. Baron regarded her sternly. Bonnie May flushed and her glance became softly appealing. She took Mrs. Baron's hand and patted it. "I'm not being rude, really," she declared. "It's as if we were asking you to settle a bet, you know."

"I don't understand at all."

"Well, please don't be angry. If you are, it will spoil everything."

Mrs. Baron turned to her son. He was telegraphing to her an earnest appeal, in which she read an assurance that she was not to be made ridiculous, even from the extraordinary view-point of Bonnie May.

"Did you understand that dinner is ready?" she asked.

"Yes, mother. We'll be right down."

Mrs. Baron left the room.

"Look at it! Look at it!" whispered Bonnie May. Her hands were clasped in a worshipful ecstasy. Her eyes seemed to retain the picture after Mrs. Baron had disappeared. Then she turned with swift intensity to Baron.

"Oh, I do hope she'll care for me a little!" she exclaimed. "She's so—so legitimate!"

CHAPTER XIII

A MYSTERIOUS SEARCH BEGINS

FROM a sky that had been rapidly clearing, a bolt fell.

Somewhere in the city, in what mysterious spot Baron could not surmise, a search for Bonnie May began. Like a wireless message seeking persistently for a receiving-centre, the quest of the unclaimed child launched itself.

The afternoon delivery of letters at the mansion had been made, and Bonnie May met the carrier at the door.

A moment later she entered the library, where Baron sat, and laid before him a single letter.

He examined postmark and inscription without being in the least enlightened. With a pair of scissors he cut the end from the envelope and drew forth the single sheet it contained.

His glance dropped to the bottom of the sheet, and then he sat up suddenly erect, and uttered an unintelligible exclamation.

For the first time in his life he had received an anonymous communication.

The thing had the merit of brevity:

"Do not give up the child, Bonnie May, to any one who does not present a legal claim on her."

A Mysterious Search Begins

A disguised handwriting. This was obvious from certain exaggerations and a lack of symmetry.

He replaced the missive in its envelope, and then he took it out and read it again.

The thing excited him. Who could be seeking the child, after days of silence—even of hiding? And who could have known of his possession of her? Again, why make a mystery of the matter?

He threw the puzzling words aside. People did not pay any attention to anonymous communications, he reflected.

Nevertheless, he could not calm himself. He started nervously at the sound of the telephone-bell down in the dining-room.

Responding, he heard Thornburg's voice at the other end of the wire.

"Is this Baron? Say, can you come down to my office right away?" The manager's voice betrayed excitement, Baron thought. Or was he himself in an abnormal frame of mind?

"Yes, certainly," he replied. He added: "Anything wrong?"

"Why—no; no, I think not. I'll tell you when you get here."

Something was wrong, however—Baron could see it the moment he entered the manager's office, half an hour later.

He had to wait a little while for an audience. Thornburg was talking to an actress—or to a woman who had the appearance of an actress. She sat with

Bonnie May

her back toward the office door and did not turn. But Thornburg, upon Baron's entrance, made a very obvious effort to bring the interview with this earlier caller to an end. He seemed vastly uncomfortable.

"What you ought to do is to get a stock engagement somewhere," Thornburg was saying impatiently. "I might possibly get you in with Abramson, out in San Francisco. He wrote me the other day about a utility woman. I'll look up his letter and see if there's anything in it. You might come back."

He arose with decision, fairly lifting the woman to her feet by the force of peremptory example. "About that other matter—" he moved toward the door, clearly intimating that he wished to finish what he had to say outside the office.

The woman followed; but in passing Baron she paused, and her eyes rested upon him sharply. There was a suggestion of suspicion in her manner, in her glance, and Baron had the vexing sensation of having seen her before without being able to identify her. A furrow appeared in his forehead. He made a determined effort to remember. No, he couldn't place her. She might be an actress he had seen on the stage somewhere or other.

She and Thornburg passed out of the office and the manager closed the door behind him. Baron could still hear their voices, now lowered to an angry whisper. Thornburg seemed to be speaking accusingly, but Baron could not catch the words.

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Then this one sentence, in Thornburg's voice, came sharply: "I tell you, you've worked me as long as you're going to!"

Then the manager, flushed and excited, re-entered the office and closed the door angrily.

And in that moment Baron remembered: That was the woman who had stood in the theatre, talking in a tense fashion with the manager, the day he, Baron, had sat up in the balcony box with Bonnie May!

He had no time to ponder this fact, however. Thornburg turned to him abruptly. "Have you seen the *Times* to-day?" he asked.

"I glanced at it. Why?"

The manager took a copy of the paper from a pigeonhole in his desk. "Look at that," he directed, handing the paper to Baron. It was folded so that a somewhat obscure item was uppermost.

Baron read: "Any one having knowledge of the whereabouts of the child calling herself Bonnie May, and professionally known by that name, will please communicate with X Y Z, in care of the *Times*."

Baron dropped the paper on the desk and turned to Thornburg without speaking.

The manager, now strangely quiet and morose, gazed abstractedly at the floor. "I wish," he said at length, "I wish she was in Tophet, or somewhere else outside my jurisdiction."

"But how do you know it is a *she*?" demanded Baron, indicating the newspaper.

Bonnie May

"I mean Bonnie May. I don't know anything about that advertisement."

For a moment Baron could only stare at the manager. He was wholly at sea. He was beginning to feel a deep resentment. He had done nothing that a man need apologize for. By a fair enough interpretation it might be said that he had tried to do a good deed. And now he was being caught in the meshes of a mystery—and Thornburg was behaving disagreeably, unreasonably.

He leaned back in his chair and tried to assume a perfectly tranquil manner. He was determined not to lose his head.

"This advertisement," he said, "seems to solve the problem. The writer of it may not care to take Bonnie May to Tophet; but at least he—or she—seems ready enough to take her off our hands. Off my hands, I should say. What more do you want?"

The manager scowled. "I don't want anybody to take her off your hands, nor my hands."

"Why not? If they're entitled to her——"

"I don't believe they're entitled to her. A child like that. . . . She's worth a lot to people who know how to handle her. Somebody who needs her in his business is probably trying to get hold of her."

"Oh, that doesn't sound reasonable to me at all. Somebody has had charge of her. Somebody brought her to the theatre. Her mother, in all

A Mysterious Search Begins

probability." Baron tried to speak quite casually. "Possibly her father's somewhere about, too."

Thornburg glared resentfully at the younger man. "If her mother was about," he demanded, "would she have waited all this while to speak?"

Baron was silenced for a moment. "Well, then," he asked at length, "what is your sizing up of the case?"

"I think she was deserted, maybe because for the moment she was a burden. I think some tin-horn manager is looking for her now. And here's another thing I know. I want her myself!"

"But you were just saying——"

"Well, then, my wife wants her. It's the same thing. She made up her mind, and now she won't change it. When I went home that night and reported that we couldn't have her, she began to cry. She wouldn't leave her bed the next morning. She's been sick ever since. She'll lie for hours at a time without saying anything but—'I wish we could have had the little girl.' It's nonsense, of course; but you have to take things as you find them. The doctor says I must get her interested in something—as if the thing were perfectly simple. If he'd ever run a theatre he'd know what it means to get anybody interested. Well, there. . . ." He calmed himself suddenly and leaned toward Baron. His next words were little more than whispered. "You see," he said, "I'm fond of her—of the wife. I don't know if you could understand how I feel.

Bonnie May

She's all I've got, and there's a good bit of the child about her, and she hasn't been quite well for a long time. She needs me to think and plan for her—to understand her, as far as I can. You interested her in this child. She wants her. And I want her to have her.”

“That's plain,” said Baron. He was trying not to be too much influenced by the manager's sudden humility, his voicing of a need. So far as he knew, he had his own rights in the case. And above everything else there was to be considered Bonnie May's right. If it seemed best for her to remain in the mansion, there, Baron resolved, she should remain, until he was forced to release her. “That's plain,” he repeated. “I think it makes the case simple enough. At least it makes it simpler. Why not communicate with these people who are advertising? If they have any claim on her you can come to terms with them. They ought to be glad to see her placed in a good home. If they haven't any claims, the sooner we know it the better.”

“I don't intend to pay any attention to them,” declared Thornburg. He was sullen and stubborn again.

“Well, of course it isn't up to you,” agreed Baron mildly. “It's I who must do it, as of course I shall.”

“That's precisely what I don't want you to do. That's why I sent for you.”

A Mysterious Search Begins

Baron flushed. "But—" he objected.

"Do you know what'll happen if you show your hand? I'll tell you. A lot of mountebanks will be pouring into your house. They'll make it look like a third-rate booking agency. Your people will like that!"

Baron could see the picture: the grotesque persons at his door; the sallow tragedian with a bass voice and no mentality to speak of; the low comedian, fat and obtuse; the ingénue with big, childish eyes and deep lines in her face; the leading lady with a self-imposed burden of cheap jewelry. He saw, too, the big-hearted among them, gravely kind toward children, and with a carefully schooled yearning for them.

He straightened up with a jerk. "Oh, that wouldn't be necessary," he declared. "I could correspond with them through the agency of the newspaper. I needn't give them my name and address at all. I could require proper proofs before I appeared in the matter at all personally."

This idea seemed to strike Thornburg as a method of escape from a dilemma. "Why shouldn't I have thought of that way myself?" he exclaimed. "I can do it that way, of course. Better for me than for you. More in my line, at least."

"I'm inclined to think I ought to do it myself," objected Baron. "I really don't see why I should leave it to you." Something in Thornburg's manner had created a suspicion in his mind. There was

Bonnie May

something too eager in the manager's tone; there was a hint of cunning.

"If I give you my word?" said Thornburg. He was resentful, offended. His face had flamed to the roots of his hair.

"Oh, if you give me your word," agreed Baron lightly. "I've no objection. Certainly, go ahead." He scrutinized his stick with a long, frowning inspection. Then he arose with decision. "I'll leave it to you," he added. "Only, I want to make one condition."

"Oh—a condition! Well, what?"

"You'll not take offense, Thornburg. You see, I have certain scruples." His mind had gone back over several episodes, and his analysis of them pointed unyieldingly to one plain duty. "I want to ask you just one question, and you're to answer it in just a word: Yes, or No."

"Well, what's the question?"

Baron looked steadily into the other's eyes.

"The woman who was here in your office when I came in; who stood with you in the theatre that day I took Bonnie May home——"

"Well?"

"Is she the—the former Mrs. Thornburg? Is she the mother of Bonnie May?"

And Thornburg's answer came resolutely, promptly, in the tone of a man who tells the truth:

"No!"

CHAPTER XIV

MR. ADDIS RECEIVES SUPPORT

UNCONSCIOUS that destiny had its eye upon her, Bonnie May found increasing comfort and contentment in her new home.

As a result of the delighted labors of Flora, her wardrobe had become more complete than it had ever been before. She developed such pride in the possession of many garments that Flora forgot her own needs and gave disproportionately of her time and means to the "outfitting" of the guest whose needs were so urgent.

As if for her special entertainment, unusual things happened.

For example, Mr. Addis called again. And a call from Mr. Addis became, in Bonnie May's drama-loving mind, the most delicious form of intrigue. Mrs. Baron became indignant at the very mention of Mr. Addis's name. Flora became quietly wistful.

Kneeling on a low Brussels hassock at the front window of the upper floor one night, Bonnie May saw the figure of a man extricate itself from the passing current of humanity and make resolutely for the Baron door.

Bonnie May

She swiftly placed her finger on her lip and reflected. "Mr. Addis!" she exclaimed in a whisper.

She made a supreme effort to leave the room without appearing to have any definite purpose. Once out of sight in the hall, however, she rushed down the stairs, just in time to open the door before the bell was rung. She was in an elated state. She had the lower floor to herself, save for Mrs. Shepard, who would be sure not to interrupt.

"Oh! Mr. Addis!" she whispered eagerly. She promptly ushered him into the drawing-room and quietly closed the door with an effect of being absent-minded, rather than designing. "Please sit down," she said. She had the light burning immediately.

She drew a chair forward and stood beside it a moment, and under her inspection Mr. Addis's cheeks took on even a deeper rosiness and his brown eyes twinkled.

"How is—my confederate?" he asked.

She was delighted. "That's it," she said. "That's what I want to be. Your confederate. May I?"

"You may," he said with emphasis.

She had sat down. "You know," she confided, "I'm strong for what you call heart interest. If you haven't got anything but manners in your show you soon find that people are patronizing the burlesque houses. Don't you think I'm right?"

Mr. Addis did not make a very pertinent response to this. "You're a queer little customer," he said.

Mr. Addis Receives Support

"That's what I call favorable criticism put into plain words. I thank you." She added: "I want to be friends with you if you'll let me because I think we can't have the right kind of heart interest around here unless you—unless you take a more prominent part."

Mr. Addis nodded. "That's my idea, too. That's why I called. If you'll tell Mrs. Baron I'm here, I'll see if I can't get her to agree with us."

Bonnie May did not stir. "Please not just yet," she begged. "Couldn't we talk things over first? If I could find out what's wrong. . . ." She looked at him with pretty embarrassment.

"What, for instance, would you like to know?"

She pulled herself farther back into her chair and reflected a moment. "Would you mind," she asked, "telling me how you got acquainted with Miss Flora?"

"Not at all. She's been coming to my store—to order things—ever since she was a little girl."

"Oh! your store. Well, go on."

"And occasionally I've dropped into the church she goes to. You know who I am, I suppose?"

She beamed upon him. "I may not have all the details. Suppose you make a complete confession."

He shot a dubious glance at her; then he smiled. Bonnie May thought his teeth were quite wonderful. "I'm the head of the Addis Stores Company."

Bonnie May looked slightly dismayed.

"A business man," added Mr. Addis firmly.

Bonnie May

"I've admired Miss Flora a very long time. I had chances just to be nice and polite to her. I haven't taken any pains to hide from her, for a year or so——"

"I understand," Bonnie May finished for him.

"Well, then. But the trouble is that Mrs. Baron——"

"She can only see you with a pencil behind your ear," supplemented Bonnie May.

Mr. Addis laughed. "Now you have it!" he agreed.

Bonnie May pondered. "You know you're *not* a regular-looking Romeo," she conceded.

"I know that very well. But at the same time——"

She gave him time to finish; then, as he seemed to lack words, she came to his aid again: "If you undertook to pay a lady's travelling expenses, it would take a pretty smooth Iago to make you do anything nasty."

"That's it!" agreed Mr. Addis with emphasis.

"Have you tried the—the little, unimportant things?"

"As for example?"

"Well, just as a suggestion: you know you weren't carrying a stick when you came in to-night."

"Oh, that sort of thing. You see, that's not in my line at all. I wouldn't know how to carry a stick, or where to put it. I don't see any use in

Mr. Addis Receives Support

'em except to beat off dogs, maybe—and all the dogs like me!”

Bonnie May nodded. “After all, I believe you’re right in not taking up that sort of thing. Anyway, I wasn’t criticising. What I was saying was just—just confederate stuff, you know.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Would you. . . . Would you mind telling me what you think about mostly? When you’re not thinking about Miss Flora?”

Mr. Addis smiled quite delightedly. “Not at all. I think of a nice home, you know. A place out in the suburbs, with several acres of ground, with a driveway, and—and chickens,” he concluded somewhat lamely.

“Chickens!” echoed Bonnie May.

“Well, there would be fresh eggs, you know; and then the look of them about the place—especially the little ones, and roosters crowing in the morning.”

She shook her head dubiously. “What else?” she asked.

“Oh, such things as investments. Ground in the new additions, where the values are going up fast. Such things.”

Bonnie May put up a restraining hand. “That will do,” she said. “Now tell me what chance you have of seeing Flora when you—when you haven’t got your pencil behind your ear.”

“Why, there’s church. I can always go to church.

Bonnie May

They make a real to-do over me there. They like to come to me for subscriptions, you know."

At the word church she looked at him with quickened interest. "Did they try to put over anything on you the first time you went there?" she asked.

"Not a thing."

"That's funny." She put her own experiences out of her mind. "Well," she resumed, "why don't you go to church regularly and let them see how nice and friendly you look when you haven't got your make-up on?"

"I've thought of that. But you see, it doesn't seem quite honest. As I understand it, church is mostly for singing, and I couldn't carry a tune any more than a bird could carry a bank-account. I'd feel like an impostor if I went."

Bonnie May, sitting bolt upright in her chair, put her hand on her heart and moved her head, carefully erect, as far forward as possible, without changing the attitude of her shoulders.

"I greet you," she said. "I can't sing, either."

"And so going to church don't seem to put me in Miss Flora's class at all."

"Still," observed Bonnie May thoughtfully, "Flora is not one of the Original Songbird Sisters herself."

"No, but she follows along. And I never could get the hang of the thing at all."

Bonnie May laughed swiftly, and then cast a

Mr. Addis Receives Support

cautious eye at the ceiling, and checked herself. "After all," she said, "we're not getting at the real trouble, whatever it is. You know the difference between the old families and the—the others, is that the others talk about making money, while the old families talk about spending it. You're not an old family, probably?"

"Well, I never talk about it, if I am. I like to work. I like to be interested in things that everybody else is interested in. The objection to me, I think, is that my business happens to be groceries. People think of soap, I suppose, and a crate of eggs with here and there a broken one in it. Ugly things, you know."

Bonnie May shuddered. "Please don't!" she implored. "You must keep your mind off of it. Your suburban-home idea is nice. But put a soft pedal on the chickens. Think of Chinese lanterns. Lawn-parties, I mean. Talk about *al fresco* performances of Shakespeare and house-parties. Don't let anybody think about how you earn money. Let them believe you've just got it. Really, it's not a very nice subject. If the word 'money' ever comes up, just yawn and say something about not being able to decide whether you want to spend the summer in the Yellowstone or in the Thousand Islands."

Mr. Addis shook his head. "No," he said. "I couldn't put on airs. You see, I think Miss Flora thinks enough of me as I am, and I couldn't be something different just to please her mother."

Bonnie May

"Had you thought of the old-fashioned way—of running away?"

Mr. Addis became quite serious. "Miss Flora's not that kind," he said promptly. "No, I've got to fight it out with—with the mother."

At this juncture Mrs. Baron, in her sitting-room, closed the anthology with the flexible leather covers and inclined her head slightly.

"Flora," she called, "I'm sure I hear voices down-stairs. Will you go see?"

Flora appeared in the doorway. "I can't hear anything," she said. "Where's Bonnie May? I thought she was here with you."

"I thought she was here, too, until just now. She may be 'receiving' to-night. Of course, she wouldn't think it necessary to take us into her confidence."

Flora sighed softly. "I really don't hear anybody," she said. "I expect she's gone up to Victor's room." A smile came to her lips as she went down-stairs. Her mother's petulance had been of the sort she might be expected to manifest if her own child had irritated her.

She was startled when she opened the drawing-room door and confronted Mr. Addis and Bonnie May.

"Enter the heroine!" was the child's greeting. "Exit the crowd." She would have left the room, then, but Miss Baron stood in her way.

Mr. Addis Receives Support

"Bonnie May!" she cried with gentle severity, "I'm afraid you're going to get us all into trouble one of these days." She turned with a flush to Mr. Addis. "Good evening," she said, with reproach in her tone. She added, with gentle mischief: "You seem to have gained an ally."

Mr. Addis was on his feet, shaking her hand vigorously. "I have," he confessed. "But please don't blame her. I think I haven't set her a very good example."

Flora turned to the child with a kind of forlorn fondness and made a characteristic movement, as if she were pushing escaping strands of hair into place. She appeared not to observe that Mr. Addis was still holding her hand. Then with evident decision she moved away from him.

"It won't do," she declared, meeting the visitor's eyes. "It's not the right way to do things."

"I've been trying to think of the right way," replied Mr. Addis with dignity.

"But doing things secretly . . . I don't believe anything is worth having unless you can have it honestly—even a friendship. You know how mother feels. And—and I can't quarrel with her. I think a little injustice is better than quarrelling." Her voice held a note of sadness, of discouragement.

Mr. Addis suddenly stood more erect. "Miss Flora, you're right," he said. "I mustn't try to hide anything. I won't."

Bonnie May

"Bonnie May," said Flora, "will you please go and ask mother to come down?"

"That's it," agreed Mr. Addis. "The thing for me to do is to have a little talk with her." And then they waited, without looking at each other, until Mrs. Baron descended the stairs and entered the room.

The poor old lady's manner hardened the instant she appeared.

"Good evening, Mr. Addis," she said in a tone of frank resentment. "I don't believe we were expecting you."

"No, I wasn't expected," replied Mr. Addis. "I hope you'll excuse me for taking you by surprise."

Flora was holding to a chair as if for support. She did not sit down.

"There's no harm done," said Mrs. Baron. "I dare say there won't be." She seated herself with great firmness of purpose and looked from Mr. Addis to Flora, and then back to Mr. Addis without winking.

This aloof form of bullying had a happy effect upon Mr. Addis. He became ominously calm.

"No, no harm at all," he said. "On the contrary. I think a little plain talk may be the best thing for all of us. Maybe I haven't come to the point as I should have done, up to now. I think I've been a little timid, you know. But here's the fact. I think Miss Flora here is the finest girl I've ever met. I've got great respect for you, too, Mrs.

Mr. Addis Receives Support

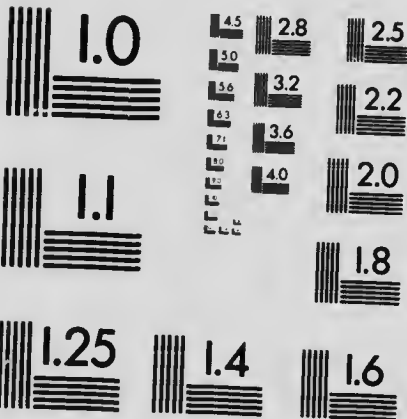
Baron. And for your family. But—the plain truth is, I want Miss Flora. I don't say she's mine for the asking. But I want the right and the chance to consult her about it. If she tells me she's quite sure I won't do, that'll settle it. But you seem to have made up your mind beforehand that Flora shall not have a mind of her own. One of the reasons why I think so highly of her is that she is a good daughter. That isn't such a common thing nowadays, Mrs. Baron. She's nice and high-minded. She wouldn't stoop to any tricks. She's a young lady who tells the truth. And that, if you will excuse me, is something I like to do myself. What I want to point out is that I don't believe you've thought what it means for you to take advantage of her obedience and respect. You don't want her to pay a penalty for being a good girl. Give her a chance. Give me a chance. I don't mind your proving to her that I wouldn't make her a good husband—if you can. But you can trust to her sense and to her honor. Be frank with her. Don't treat her as if she were a child. You know, ma'am, it's her affair more than it is yours, after all. Give her and me a chance to talk it over."

Flora's color came and went during this patient, rather labored recital. The utterly prosaic course events were taking, as a result of her mother's prejudice, impressed her strangely. She could have laughed—but also she could have wept.



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Bonnie May

Mrs. Baron had refused to meet Mr. Addis's eyes while he spoke, but now she compelled herself to regard him. Her eyebrows were at a most formidable elevation. "I have tried to impress you with the fact, Mr. Addis," she said, "that I do not consider you a suitable person to—to become associated in any way with my family."

Mr. Addis flushed. "The loss would be mine, ma'am, if I were not permitted to be friendly toward all the members of your family, but, if you will pardon me, I can very easily console myself for the loss, if I have Miss Flora." These words Mr. Addis spoke with unmistakable emphasis.

"Would you mind," said Mrs. Baron, speaking very evenly, "would you mind not speaking quite so loudly?"

She succeeded in conveying the idea that he had violated all the laws of good taste, and that she had borne with him like a martyr.

Mr. Addis looked at her questioningly. When he spoke again his voice was low, his words were measured.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I always tell my young men not to become too spirited when they're in earnest. If I have offended in that way I ask you to excuse me."

There was a lump in Flora's throat. He had accepted a rebuke which seemed to her needless, and even cruel, with just the kind of dignity which her mother should have prized above all other

Mr. Addis Receives Support

qualities. And he seemed so splendidly simple and earnest and strong.

She came forward with an obvious effort to speak and move easily. "Mother," she said, "Mr. Addis is only asking to be received here as a visitor. He has paid us the compliment of wishing to become better acquainted with us. Can you think of any good reason why he shouldn't?—because, really, I can't think of any at all."

"Oh, you can't!" responded her mother. "Then I'll make it plain to you. For the present I must ask you to go up-stairs and let me have a word with this—this gentleman, who appears to have his own method of getting into houses where he isn't invited."

Flora was too deeply wounded to respond to this. Shame and grief were in her glance. "Good night," she said. She went out of the room without glancing back. But there was something strangely eloquent in her exit. She seemed to take with her beauty and light, and to leave the room a prey to all manner of unloveliness.

Something in her bearing had dismayed Mrs. Baron. Something, too, in the cold, steady glance of Mr. Addis dismayed her. She turned nervously toward the hall. "Flora!" she called. "Flora!" And she followed her daughter up the broad stairway.

They had all forgotten Bonnie May. When she had summoned Mrs. Baron, at the behest of Flora

Bonnie May

and Mr. Addis, she had returned, quietly and unobserved, and had taken her place inconspicuously in a far corner of the room.

Now she came forward, a light of eagerness in her eyes.

"That was a great speech you made," she said.

Mr. Addis, gazing toward the empty staircase, seemed unaware of her presence.

"It was good stuff," she added, and then Mr. Addis turned to her with an almost unseeing glance.

"I think it's time for you to go off-stage," she added nervously. "But I'll bet you one thing. When the big climax comes, you and Flora will be standing in the middle of the stage, close together, and the rest will be grouped about just to fill out the picture."

She let him out at the door. She did not seem to be at all disturbed because he seemed scarcely conscious of her presence.

CHAPTER XV

A QUESTION OF RECONSTRUCTION

IN keeping with the Baron manner, no mention of Mr. Addis's name was made openly in the mansion the next morning. The normal atmosphere was changed only by a more pronounced reticence, which doubtless hid varying degrees of sullenness or resentment. But there was no lack of politeness. On the contrary, there was an excess of it.

Of course it was realized that Mr. Addis had not been finally disposed of. Mrs. Baron's idea was to await developments—and so was Flora's.

Only Bonnie May violated the well-established tradition of the household.

Early in the morning she encountered Flora, and made occasion to engage her in a brief conversation. Flora was planning to go out with the McKelvey girls after breakfast, and she held in her hands the green-and-silver tailored skirt when Bonnie May came upon her. She was regarding it with the care and heartache of a young woman in love with pretty things who has very few of them, and she did not seem quite responsive when the child began a somewhat extraordinary commentary.

Bonnie May

She scarcely heeded Bonnie May's introductory words, but she *did* begin to pay attention when she heard this:

"Of course I know I've got nothing to do with the giving out of parts, but if I had, he'd strike me just right for the rôle of the husband."

Miss Baron flushed. She knew just whom the child meant, but she felt that she must pretend to some measure of doubt.

"What in the world are you talking about?" she asked. Her faint smile robbed her words of sharpness.

"I think he's just the kind that would look well to the people in the gallery, and to the people down in the parquet, too. Mr. Addis."

Flora sat down in an aimless fashion, holding the green-and-silver skirt across her knees.

"Do you think," she asked meditatively, "that he would look well—anywhere?"

"Do you mean, do I think he would look—ridic'lous, anywhere?"

Miss Baron leaned back and looked with a sort of mournful joyousness at the ceiling. "You do say such amazing things!" she declared. "To use your word, You don't think he would look ridiculous anywhere?"

"Never in the world!" was the emphatic response.

"But you know he isn't at all like—well, like the leading men in plays, for example."

A Question of Reconstruction

"You mean what they call *matinée* idols?"

"Well, he's entirely different from them, isn't he?"

"But you wouldn't want him to be like them, would you?"

Miss Baron shook her head slowly. "No, I wouldn't. . . ."

"I'll tell you how he strikes me," said Bonnie May. "If he came on the stage, the audience would think it was the business manager, come to make an announcement. You know the business manager is the man who has the money—sometimes; who pays the hotel bills and finds out about train-time, and sees that your baggage is there ahead of you when you get to the end of a trip. He's the real man with the show. These fellas that look like fashion-plates are all right as far as they go. But you know once in a while the walking gets bad, and then the wise guys are the ones that stand in with the business manager."

She went away, nodding with emphasis, and left Miss Baron to complete her toilet.

Beyond this brief interchange of words not a word about Mr. Addis had been spoken when Baron, immediately after breakfast, went away in response to a telephone call from a newspaper office. The Sunday editor had an idea for a special article and, as it turned out, Baron was employed down-town all day.

There was a "story" about an exhibit in one of

Bonnie May

the art-galleries to write, and this he had done with one of those intervals of ardor which characterized him.

He had also called on Thornburg. He wanted to know how the mysterious quest of Bonnie May was progressing, and if the manager had learned anything as a result of his response to the advertisement in the *Times*.

But Thornburg had no information for him. He had replied to the advertisement according to his promise, he said, but he had received no response. He admitted quite frankly that he had permitted two days to pass before doing this. He had been unusually busy. But he had attended to the matter as soon as he had been able to find time—and nothing had come of it.

However, as Baron was leaving the manager's office, Thornburg called him back. "By the way," he said, "it is possible Mrs. Thornburg may have something interesting to tell you. I just happened to remember that she asked me to invite you up to the house when I saw you. I believe she mentioned Bonnie May. Suppose you drop around as soon as it's convenient."

On his way home that afternoon, Baron thought of the manager's message and his manner, and again he became suspicious. He couldn't help believing that Thornburg knew more than he admitted. But then, he concluded, perhaps he was only innocently plotting to get possession of the

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child for whom there now appeared to be no lawful claimant.

When he reached home his mother was the first person he encountered, and he surmised by her manner that this circumstance was a result of her own design and management.

"Anything wrong, mother?" he asked. He had visions of kidnappers watching the house from hidden points of vantage.

Mrs. Baron led the way into the dining-room and took a seat in the bay window overlooking the anæmic grass-plot.

"Yes—entirely wrong," she responded. "Do you know what this country had after the Civil War?"

"Of course. It had peace."

"It had reconstruction."

"Oh!—reconstruction. Certainly."

"*That's* what I'm going to have in this household."

"All in favor of reconstruction will signify—" began Baron lightly. But his mother interrupted him quite sharply.

"I don't intend to be annoyed any more by that man Addis," she declared, a flush mounting to her cheeks.

"Oh," said Baron, for the first time comprehending. "And my part in the—the new order of things is to begin snubbing him?"

"I don't care if you look at it in that way. I don't intend he shall come here."

Bo. e May

Baron looked at her thoughtfully. "My difficulty is," he said, "that I understand your position, and his, too. And FICA's. Addis is an awfully decent chap. I think you don't look at him quite right. He's got lots of friends of the right sort. Men friends. He doesn't go in for the—oh, the ladylike things. But he belongs to the hunting clubs, and some of the best commercial clubs, and—well, I'm sure he's every inch a man."

"So far as we're concerned, he's every inch a grocer."

Baron winced. "Oh, mother!" he protested, and after an interval of silence, "mother!" he exclaimed, "what are we? What am I? A loafer, living off a woman's money; depending on my parents; having no prospects of my own making. There are times when I wish I had learned how to be a grocer, or a blacksmith, or a carpenter, or anything that would give me a place I could put a label on. Honestly, I don't see that *I've* got anything to make me look down on—on anybody."

Mrs. Baron was not at all impressed by this. "I won't answer that sort of nonsense," she said. "And as for Mr. Addis——"

The door into the kitchen opened and Mrs. Shepard stood revealed. Her brow was furrowed. She looked beseechingly at Mrs. Baron.

"Yes, right away," said Mrs. Baron, rising. But she paused and looked at her son again. "And

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that—that unruly child who's been letting him in. She's to be taken in hand, too."

"Yes, mother?"

"As long as she's here you and Flora have got to quit treating her as if she were a—a fairy queen. It's absurd. She's got to be restrained and—and enlightened."

"I'm quite willing to do my part. The trouble is I've been too busy being enlightened by her to do very much enlightening on my part."

"Well, she hasn't enlightened me at all. And I'll be able to attend to her without a great deal of aid. She's got to get down out of the clouds, to real things."

"She doesn't seem to fit in with our kind of realities, does she?" he conceded. And then he smiled. "If it were only right to regard even children simply as human beings! They have to be themselves sooner or later. If it were only possible to let them develop along that line from the start!"

But the kitchen door had been opened by Mrs. Shepard again—this time timorously and incompletely—and Mrs. Baron was gone.

Baron climbed two flights of stairs before he came upon the object of his next search. Bonnie May was in the attic.

She was all eagerness when she saw him. "Do you know what happened to-day?" she began.

Baron stopped abruptly. "Happened!" he

Bonnie May

echoed, unworced speculations again flooding his mind.

"Oh, nothing wrong. It's just—Mrs. Baron gave me my first music lesson."

"Music lesson!" he echoed, and then: "Was *that* all?"

"Isn't it enough?" She came close to him and whispered: "I'm to be 'cultivated.'"

He frowned. "I don't like the word. Who said so?"

"I wouldn't mind about a word. Honestly, it wasn't so bad. I've often thought I'd like to be able to hit a few high spots on the piano. Sometimes a little thing like that means ever so much to you. Imagine yourself having the lead in a play with a lot of love-making in it. You have a line like this—to the leading man: 'You'll be like all the rest. You'll forget me among all those gay scenes.' Don't you see how much it helps if you can say it sitting on a piano-stool, and winding up by turning to the keyboard and trifling with it scantly? You don't need to play well. It wouldn't do to play really well. Just a little, you know. Absent-mindedly, with your head down. That's what I want to be able to do."

Baron had pulled a chair close to the window. "And so you took a music lesson?" he asked. He was recalling the serenely inefficient manner in which his mother played certain familiar hymns. It did not occur to him that she would attempt to

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teach Bonnie May anything but this class of music. Indeed, he felt sure she would not have been able to recall any other kind. "I'm glad you don't object to it," he said. Presently he added, without very much interest in the subject: "After all, some of the old hymns are very pretty."

"Yes; but you know I'm not going to play hymns."

"Oh, you're not! What do another expect to teach you, then?"

"At first she thought hymns would do; but when I explained to her that I wouldn't care to play them she said we could take up something else."

Baron regarded her steadily. She was obviously withholding something. "Bonnie May!" he remonstrated. "You didn't have another disagreement, did you?"

"It was more like an argument—and I must say she behaved beautifully."

"And did you behave 'beautifully,' too?"

She had drawn her chair close to the window and was looking out, so that he saw, chiefly, a small shoulder and a profile which was quite eloquent of independence and courage. "Yes, I think I did. Of course, it was harder for me than for her. You see, I had to be It, as the saying is. Yes, that's how to express it. She had framed the game up, and I had to be It."

"What—what really happened?"

Bonnie May

"She began in that innocent way of hers. She thought a little knowledge of music would be good for me. I said yes to that. Yes, she went on, it would be quite proper for me to learn to play some of the simpler hymns. When she said 'hymns'——"

She sat quite askew and laughed, and when Baron made no response at all she became uneasy. "You know you've got to protect yourself," she insisted defiantly.

"Very well; and then what?"

"I told her it was so good of her to be willing to teach me, but that—well, I told her hymns wouldn't do."

"Why wouldn't they do? They're music."

"It's like I told her. Hymns are all well enough for persons who don't understand very well—like raised letters for the blind. But when Mrs. Shepard lets me set the table, how would it sound if I kept saying: 'I'm helping Mrs. Shepard! I'm helping Mrs. Shepard!' She might be too polite to say anything, but she'd be thinking: 'The gabby little thing, why don't she just do it and let it go at that?' On the other hand, if I just did the best I could without making out that I was the whole show, she'd be apt to say: 'Bless her heart, she's really helping.' I think singing hymns is about the same thing. It's as if you kept saying: 'I'm praising God! I'm praising God!' It would be—oh, bad taste. But if you sang 'Annie Laurie,' or something like that, you can imagine they'd bend their ears up

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in the skies—if they can hear that far—and say: ‘Isn’t that nice?’ That’s what I said to Mrs. Baron. Some spiel, wasn’t it?”

Baron was glad that she turned to him for only the briefest scrutiny.

“And—what did mother say?” he wanted to know.

“I thought she was going to have the curtain let down for a minute. She looked so funny. But you see, she knew I was right. Anybody could see that. She stared at me. And I stared at her, too—only mine was different. Mine was what you call a baby stare. Innocent, you know.” She turned to him again, and something in his eyes checked her. “Oh, I know how that sounded to you,” she said with quick remonstrance. “You never put things like that into words. But you know very well everybody *does* have special ways of looking when they want to. As if they didn’t understand, or as if they were surprised—or weren’t. You have to do things like that. That’s all I meant.”

“I—think I understand,” said Baron.

They remained silent for a time, and through Baron’s mind a single phrase kept running: “Like raised letters for the blind.” Wasn’t cynicism, wherever it existed, merely a protest by people of refined taste against the inartistic forms which goodness often assumed? And hadn’t he and his family always paid far too little heed to the golden legends

Bonnie May

of life, and too much to the desire to have them in "raised letters"?

He was aroused by the voice of his companion; by her voice and by the eagerness with which she gazed at a little drama which was being enacted down in the street. An enormous, red-faced beer-driver had stopped his dray at the curb to chat with a ruddy-cheeked, buxom girl with glossy black hair, who was laughing up into his face. The two powerful brewery horses stood patiently at rest, their eyes harboring the placid expression of the weary draft-horse that comes immediately when a stop is made.

"Aren't they happy?" commented Bonnie May, speaking as if from the indulgent summit of great age.

"I don't know," Baron argued. "I shouldn't think it very probable."

"But can't you see that they are?"

"Because they are laughing?"

"That—and their eyes. The way they are looking at each other is just as if they were patting each other on the cheeks—now, isn't it? I think they are both just beautiful. They look as if they were quite happy, and didn't care to be anything else."

"Nonsense! Who ever heard of a beer-driver being beautiful? And such an enormous creature, and the kind of work he does, and—and such clothes!"

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Her brows contracted. "Aren't you prejudiced against him just because—well, maybe, because of the kind of work he does?"

"I think maybe I am. I should think anybody might be."

"I see. You was thinking something ugly about him—so, of course, he wouldn't look nice to you. You see, I wasn't. I think maybe he does that kind of work because he was never taught to do anything else. If your work isn't lovely, I think you deserve all the more credit, if you can be glad while you're doing it."

"But don't you see—people choose their work—they choose to be what they are."

"Not at all. I didn't. Did you?"

"And just see how—how *loud* he is! And notice the color of his face and hands!"

"Yes," she said. She continued to look critically, and her eyes were filled with joy when the driver suddenly leaned back and laughed until the sound reached them above the scores of other noises. "That's because he laughs so much, and is out in the sun and the weather most of the time. I think he's lovely—yes, I do. For my part, I'd like to get up on the seat and ride with him. I'll bet he would take good care of you. And you can see that nice girl would, too."

"With a beer-driver!" exclaimed Baron, really amazed.

She regarded him serenely. "Oh, a beer-driver,"

Bonnie May

she said. "I wouldn't think about that part of it at all. I would have to know something about him that really counted, if it came down to an argument. You're only thinking of his make-up. And, my goodness! I've seen many a Simon Legree go into his dressing-room and change his clothes—and come out the nicest sort of a fellow. I've got a hunch that if there is—" She paused, shamefaced, and then continued: "If there is somebody up in the skies keeping tab—somebody managing the big stage—the whole world, I mean—he knows just what we are, or ought to be, if the make-up wasn't there to make us seem ugly and mean and hateful."

"But, look here! That isn't a make-up that fellow down there has on; it's himself!"

"Not at all! What's the difference whether it is the wardrobe mistress that hands you what you have to wear, or—or just accident? I mean the way you happen to get started, and whatever it is you have to do. You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, well enough. But what *I* mean is, why should you suppose that chap down there didn't get just what he studied for—what he fitted himself for?"

"Because they give you a part and say: 'This is your part,' and that's all there is to it."

"Oh, on the stage—possibly. But what can you see in that fellow that makes you think there's anything to him—that he'd be trustworthy, for example?"

A Question of Reconstruction

She leaned forward, wholly alert. "It's easy," she declared. "See how he sits, with his feet square on the dashboard, and with his head held up high that way. That means he knows what he's about."

Baron felt himself getting red in the face. He remembered his habit of sitting with his legs tangled up when he was at his ease. Quite cautiously he got himself into a more purposeful attitude. "Anything else?" he asked.

The beer-driver was now driving away.

"Yes. Look at the way he is holding those reins—nice and straight and firm. The horses know he's there, all right. They trust him. They *know* him. Look at him now! It's just as if he were saying to them: 'Take it easy, old fellows, we're all here together.'"

Baron leaned forward and watched the disappearing dray. Yes, there was a certain method in the man's way of holding the reins, and in his whole bearing, which suggested just what the child had put into words.

He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head and smiled.

"What is it?" asked Bonnie May anxiously.

"I'm afraid I couldn't explain to you. I was just thinking about—about certain forms of reconstruction."

CHAPTER XVI

MRS. THORNBURG REVEALS A SECRET

BARON shook his head slowly. He had been thinking about that advertisement in the *Times* which Thornburg had answered without any result.

"Strange," he mused. "I won't believe but that somebody is looking for her—somewhere. Children like that are not dropped down and deserted like superfluous kittens or puppies. There's something wrong somewhere."

Then he remembered that Mrs. Thornburg wished to see him; that, according to Thornburg, she had "mentioned Bonnie May."

Possibly she knew something. At any rate, Baron felt that he ought to call on her. It was just after the dinner-hour—of the day on which Mrs. Baron had announced her policy of reconstruction—and the evening was flinging a challenge to all mankind to get out of doors and enjoy the spring air.

He took up his stick and hat and left the house.

He found Mrs. Thornburg sadly changed since he had seen her last. She was unmistakably very ill, though the only symptoms revealed to Baron's

Mrs. Thornburg Reveals a Secret

inexpert eye were a pathetic thinness and pallor and a profound lassitude.

She was alone, Thornburg having just gone out.

"It was good of you to come," she said when Baron entered. She spoke as if she had been expecting him. And without circumlocution she continued: "I wanted to talk to you about the little girl. You haven't let anybody have her, have you?"

"No," replied Baron. Then he added lightly: "I think we've changed our minds about letting her go. It seems likely now that we'll keep her with us indefinitely."

He was glad that her glance rested upon her thin, clasped hands. He could note the effect of his statement with a steady scrutiny which need cause him no compunction.

To his surprise she seemed quite pleased. "It makes me glad to know that she is to be with nice people," she said, lifting to him now a softly grateful glance. She explained: "You see, I'm sure I'm too ill to have her now even if. . . ." Her lips trembled and her eyes filled.

"But you'll be better," said Baron, reading her thought. Clearly she had despaired of ever being any better. "When you're able to have her, she'll be so happy to visit you. I mean Bonnie May. She's a wonderfully sociable little creature. If she were invited to come to see you she would be delighted. Attentions like that—such as you would

Bonnie May

pay to grown people—have a wonderful effect upon her.”

“Yes. . . . And of course some day she will be coming here to stay.”

“You mean—” Baron was surprised that his suggestion had been received with a dully uttered, enigmatic remark, rather than gratitude or eagerness.

“You don’t know what I mean by that?” There was regret in her tone, reluctance in her glance—as if she knew he was not dealing honestly and frankly by her.

“No, truly, I don’t.”

“Ah, well. . . . But I wanted to tell you why I was so eager to have her when you called before. You see, I wanted to—to atone. . . .”

She sat listlessly, lost in troubled memories, and Baron waited.

“Mr. Thornburg came to me one time, in the one moment of his greatest need, and asked me to help him. And I failed him.”

She leaned back and closed her eyes for a moment, and Baron thought how out of harmony she was: the ailing woman whose whole being was in a minor key, amid surroundings which suggested only sturdiness and well-being.

“He was always generous toward me, and patient. He was always giving, giving, and never asking. I think I got used to that and just took it for granted. And then one day he came home,

Mrs. Thornburg Reveals a Secret

excited, as happy as a child . . . and asked me. . . .
It was such a little thing . . . and I refused.

"You know, he had been married when I first met him. An actress. It didn't last long. She got tired of the life and wanted to go back to the stage. I think she appealed to his generosity. It would have been easy to do that. At any rate, he allowed her to go away and take their little girl. I can't understand how he brought himself to let the little daughter go, too. I have an idea he was so troubled because *she* wanted to go that he didn't realize how much the child meant to him, or would come to mean. She was only a year old then. I never blamed him for that episode in his life. I just concluded that the woman was worthless. And when I married him we didn't speak of his other marriage—nothing in connection with it. It was just as if it hadn't happened. Then, after a year, or about a year, he—he made the one request of me. The mother had offered to give him the little girl. He wanted to bring her to me, to have her in our home.

"And that made me jealous and unhappy. I can't explain . . . or defend myself. I could scarcely answer him when he spoke about it. And when I didn't answer he looked at me, and after a little a strange expression came into his eyes. He was chilled and bewildered. He had been so happy. He couldn't understand. He just gave it up, and the next day he was trying to pretend

Bonnie May

that nothing had come between us; that I hadn't been ungracious and cruel.

"You see, I was thinking of *her* child, and he was thinking of his own. Mine was the woman's—the narrow—point of view, and his was the father's. Maybe you can understand a little of what I felt. I couldn't have the child here in the house, while its own mother. . . . It would have been like giving *her* a place in our home—the woman, I mean. You can't really separate people by putting their bodies in different places. You see what I mean?"

"Yes," assented Baron, "I think I see quite clearly."

"And I was sure she was a bad woman. And I felt that if her child were in the house, her—her real self would be here, too. Her influence, I mean. Bodies are not everything. Sometimes they're even the least things of all. I was afraid that other woman's very presence would be here among us on the most sacred occasions: at bedtime, to see if her child were covered up, and in the early hours of Christmas morning, jealously looking to see what we'd given her, and jealous of us, because we were fond of her. She would be a real influence in the house. It couldn't be helped."

"But a bad woman. . . . Surely a bad woman would forget," suggested Baron.

"Well, not our kind of a woman, anyway. How could she have deserted a man who was good to

Mrs. Thornburg Reveals a Secret

her? And how could she consent to give up her child afterward? It might be right for her to leave her husband; but for a mother to give up a little daughter. . . . No, I couldn't think of having here in our home a link to bind us with a woman like that—a life out in the unknown, on the streets that are strange to us, that are strange to all faithful, happy people.

“And then when it was too late I began to see his side of it. He was the father just as much as she was the mother. She was *his* child as much as hers—more, if he loved her more. And I began to realize what it must be to a father to have his little daughter away from him, perhaps not loved and provided for, possibly facing an evil future. Oh, the night that thought came to me! And always he was so kind to me, and patient. He did not speak of his daughter again. And I waited. . . . I knew he would speak again some day, and I wanted to grow strong enough to say to him honestly: ‘Ah, do bring her, and she shall have love here, here in her own home’ . . .”

She lifted her hands to her cheeks and closed her eyes. It was as if she must shut out some of the impressions which crowded into her mind.

Baron waited until a measure of calm came upon her. “And—he never did?”

She opened her eyes and regarded him inquiringly.

“I mean, he never spoke of her again?”

She regarded him with a smouldering look in her

Bonnie May

eyes. Then she leaned forward, her hands gripping the arms of her chair. "I honestly believe you don't know!" she whispered.

And in an instant she had taken from a little box on the table near which she sat an envelope. She drew from it a single sheet and passed it to Baron.

He turned a little, so that the light from the table fell upon it and read:

"Do be good to the little girl your husband has brought to you. You ought to be, because he is her father."

There was no name. Baron handed the sheet back to her. He was thinking hard. "Who could have written it?" he asked.

"Of course you realize that I don't *know*," she replied. "Do you mean to ask me what I think?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think her mother wrote it. I think she must have lost track of the child, and concluded that Mr. Thornburg had taken her. I think she must have known of my—my jealousy on that other occasion. I think she wrote this note hoping that I would refuse to have the child in the house if I knew who she was. It seems plain that she wants her now."

Baron was examining the date of the postmark on the envelope. She saw that furrows were gathering on his forehead.

She explained: "It came some time ago. I had it with me here when you called that first time."

Mrs. Thornburg Reveals a Secret

"Oh!" exclaimed Baron. "And you knew, then——"

"Yes, I knew then."

"But you haven't . . . Mr. Thornburg. . . ."

"I didn't show him this. He doesn't know. Surely you can understand. He has acted a lie, in trying to get the little girl into the house without telling me about her. And I can't blame him for that, after what happened that other time. But I can't bear to let him know that—that I know."

"But don't you see, if Bonnie May is really his daughter, and if he weren't afraid to tell you so, he could bring her here without any further hindrance!"

"No, he couldn't. Not if the mother wants her."

Baron arose. "After all, it's largely guesswork—conclusions reached in the dark," he said. "You've received an anonymous note. That's all the foundation you have for what you've told me. And people who write anonymous letters. . . ."

He reflected dubiously, and then he came to a decision

"I've reason to believe," he said, "that there is good ground for you to reject what's in that note."

She leaned forward, observing him intently.

Baron was remembering the actress who had called on Thornburg; the woman who, almost certainly, was she who had taken the child into

Bonnie May

Thornburg's theatre. He was recalling his question to the manager, and the latter's vehement, prompt response.

"You mean," questioned Mrs. Thornburg, "that you don't think Bonnie May is really . . . that you don't believe it was her mother who wrote this note?"

"It's difficult to be quite sure of anything," said Baron, "but I would stake a great deal on that one thing being true—that it wasn't Bonnie May's mother who wrote that anonymous note."

CHAPTER XVII

"A KIND OF DUEL"

THAT night in his attic room Baron arrived, by perfectly logical reasoning, at two conclusions, each of which was precisely the opposite of the other.

The first of these conclusions was that he had a perfect right to shape Bonnie May's future according to his own inclination. The second was that he had no right at all to do such a thing.

He arrived at the first conclusion in this manner:

He had made an honest effort to locate any person or persons having a legal and just claim on the child, and he had failed. If the Thornburgs had any claim upon her, it was not his fault that they had bungled their affairs until they were unwilling to make their claim public.

Therefore he had a right to have and to hold Bonnie May, and to regard her, if not as his own, at least as a permanent member of the household.

His second and contrary opinion began to shape itself when he recalled the picture of Mrs. Thornburg, helpless and despairing, greatly desiring the

Bonnie May

presence of the child in her own home in order that she might complete a great moral victory over herself.

A man couldn't oppose his claims and advantages to a need like that!

Besides—it was borne in upon Baron more and more strongly—there was a very serious question as to the child's best interests.

She was an actress, born and bred, and some day she would surely hear the call of the theatre. Not in the near future certainly. Baron couldn't bear to associate children and the stage. But in a few years. . . .

And if she were ever to return to the profession which was her birthright, it was Thornburg she would need, and not the Barons.

Moreover, Thornburg was a wealthy man, and childless. He was now ready to take the child into his home as his own. There could be only one outcome to such an arrangement—an outcome wholly in Bonnie May's favor.

Therefore, his—Baron's—right to keep the child was of the shakiest possible nature.

And having reached these two conclusions, dwelling now upon the one and now upon the other, Baron extinguished his light and went to bed.

In the morning at about seven o'clock, while he was standing before the glass with a military hair-brush in his hand, his problem was solved

“A Kind of Duel”

for him in a flash. He stood with the brush suspended in air. A light leaped into his eyes.

“How simple!” he exclaimed. “The very way out of it. The only way.”

At three o'clock that afternoon he entered Thornburg's private office, after having taken the precaution of ascertaining (1st) that Thornburg had returned from luncheon in a fairly good humor, and (2d) that the manager was alone.

“You know I had a little talk with Mrs. Thornburg about Bonnie May last night,” he began, when Thornburg had thrust a chair toward him. He was assuming his most casual manner, primarily because it suited his present purpose, and also because he had not failed to note that Thornburg's face had darkened slightly at sight of him.

“Yes, I know.” The manager glanced at his desk as if he were a very busy man.

“I felt the least bit—up a tree, as the fellow said, after I had talked to her,” continued Baron. “You know I want to—to be decent about things.”

“Of course,” agreed the manager, giving part of his attention to the papers which were strewn about his desk. “And I suppose the child is a good deal of a burden——”

He glanced up, and Baron wondered why a man shouldn't be able to keep the light of triumph out of his eyes when he really tried to.

“Not at all!” he interrupted blandly.

Bonnie May

“—or that you are sure she will be, when the novelty of having her about wears off.” He squared about sharply, with the air of a man who means to do something handsome. “I’m still ready to take her, if you decide that you’d like to give her up. Of course, I don’t know how soon I might change my mind. In case Mrs. Thornburg loses interest, I’d be through with the case, naturally.”

He turned to his desk again and examined a letter which came uppermost, frowning and pursing his lips as if he were giving it deep consideration.

Baron did not wholly succeed in repressing a smile. “All wrong,” he said amiably. “The Greeks must have borne gifts to you before now, Thornburg. No, I’m not tired of her. I’m not likely to be, either. Why, she’s like a tonic. Sense? You wouldn’t believe it. She’s forever surprising you by taking some familiar old idea and making you really see it for the first time. She can stay at our house until the roof falls in, if she only will—though of course I don’t hope she’d be willing to. But don’t think there’s any question of our getting tired of her. She’s not that kind. I might add, neither are we.”

Much to his amazement Thornburg sprang to his feet excitedly.

“I don’t know what you’re getting at!” he exclaimed. “If you’ve got anything to say, why not say it and be done with it?”

"A Kind of Duel"

Baron arose, too. He thought he was justified in feeling offended. "I think," he said quietly, "I haven't got anything to say, after all." He managed to keep his voice and eyes under control. These proclaimed no unfriendliness. But his lips had become somewhat rigid.

"But you did have," retorted Thornburg. He sat down again and produced a handkerchief with which he wiped his face and neck nervously. "Come, don't pay any attention to my bad manners. You know I've got a thousand things to worry me."

"Yes, I know. I'm really trying to help—or I had the thought of helping. You—you make it a bit difficult."

"There was something about the little girl," said Thornburg.

"Yes. As to her—status. Chapter I—the inquiry for her, and our little flurry—seems to be completed."

"They probably didn't care about her very much."

"Well—possibly. At any rate, we seem to have come to a full stop for the time being. And I've been thinking about the future. I ought to tell you that after my talk with Mrs. Thornburg, the case didn't seem quite so simple as it had seemed."

Thornburg, clasping his knee in his hands, was bending upon the floor a gaze darkened by labored thought.

Bonnie May

"I've begun to feel a kind of moral responsibility. At first I thought only of my own point of view. My family's, I mean. Our interests and pleasures. But you see there's also something to be said from the standpoint of our—our guest. I wouldn't want to lessen her chances of future happiness. I wouldn't want to have my way altogether and then find out after a while that it had been the wrong way. I never realized before how much the people of the stage are born and not made. That's the gist of the matter. There will come a time when nothing in the world is going to keep Bonnie May off the stage. That's my conviction now."

"They say children *do* inherit—" interposed Thornburg.

"The question of her future stumps you a bit. It's not as if she were like any other little girl I ever heard of. It's like this: I'd like to have a skylark in a cage, if it would sing for me. But I'd never be able to forget that its right place was in the sky. You see what I mean. I don't want to be wholly responsible for keeping Bonnie May—out of the sky."

"Well?"

"My ideas aren't exactly definite. But I want her to be free. I want her to have a part in working things out the way she wants them."

"That's good sense. Turn her over to me, then."

"That's not the idea at all. I think up to a

"A Kind of Duel"

certain point it may be good for her to experience the—the gentle tyrannies which are part of her life with us. On the other hand, if she becomes identified with you (I don't know just what other word to use), and you get to be fond of her, why then in a material sense. . . . Oh, I don't like the tone of that at all. But you'll get the idea, and take it for granted that what I'm trying to get at is that I don't want to stand in Bonnie May's light."

Baron tried to join the manager in the latter's impatient laugh. "You'll have to excuse my denseness," said Thornburg. "I get your meaning as easy as I can see into a pocket. The way it sounds to me is that you're sure you want to keep her, and that you're just as sure that you don't want to keep her."

"That's nearly it," admitted Baron, flushing slightly. "Suppose I say that I want to keep her a part of the time, and that I'd like you to keep her the other part. Suppose I offer to share her with you: to encourage her to visit Mrs. Thornburg a day at a time—days at a time—a week at a time. Suppose we take her on a kind of partnership basis. No unfair influence; no special inducements. Suppose I make it plain to her that you and Mrs. Thornburg are her real friends, and that you will be glad to have her come as often as she likes, and stay as long as she likes."

Thornburg's eyes were beginning to brighten.

Bonnie May

"Would you," added Baron, "do the same thing by us? I mean, would you encourage her to come to us when she felt like it, and see that she had the chance to go as freely as she came?"

Thornburg's flushed face was all good-nature now. The little barriers which he had kept between his visitor and himself fell away completely.

"A kind of duel between us," he elaborated, "to see which of us has the best attractions to offer?"

"Well—yes, you might put it that way, I suppose. That's a theatrical phrase, I believe. Perhaps it wouldn't have occurred to me. At any rate, the plan I've outlined would give her a chance to do a little deciding on her own account. It would give her a chance to give her affections to those who win them. It would place some of the responsibility for her future on her own shoulders. And whatever conclusions she came to I'd be willing to bank on."

"That," declared Thornburg with enthusiasm, "is what I call the proposition of a first-class sport." He extended his hand to Baron. "You stick to your part of the bargain and I'll play fair to the letter."

He would have shown Baron out of the office, then. He had a taste for suitable climaxes, too. But Baron lingered, chiefly because he didn't like the prospect of an almost mischievous conflict which the manager seemed to welcome and to anticipate.

"A Kind of Duel"

"She can be loyal to us all," he said, "if she's encouraged in being."

At the sound of his own words he fell to thinking.

No, she wouldn't need to be encouraged. She would be loyal without that. There was nothing to fear on that score at all.

He looked up rather whimsically. "Well, I'll tell her," he said.

"You'll tell her——"

"That she has been invited to visit Mr. and Mrs. Thornburg, and make herself quite at home."

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. BARON TAKES UP THE GAUNTLET

HAVING decided upon what he conceived to be an admirable plan of action, Baron was unwilling to believe that he ought to be in any hurry to execute his plan.

For the time being Bonnie May was getting along very well indeed. In fact, Baron made a point of looking into this matter with a good deal of thoroughness, from a somewhat new angle, and he was greatly pleased by what he discovered.

Little by little the child had become habituated to the home atmosphere. This, of course, was due largely to the fact that the other members of the family had become habituated to having her about. They no longer felt constrained to utter pleasant nothings, or to hold their tongues, because of her presence. When they forgot her "strangeness," she ceased to be strange.

She obediently and even intelligently attended when Mrs. Baron gave her her lesson on the piano.

"Though I think," she confided to Baron on one occasion, "I could get hold of the high places without going through all the funny business she seems to regard so highly."

Mrs. Baron Takes Up the Gauntlet

Baron spoke in defense of the "funny business," and presently she agreed with him.

The guest's wardrobe had been made gloriously complete, and in this relationship another pleasant development was to be noted.

Bonnie May had been painfully accustomed to the use of trunks. Now she made the acquaintance of bureau drawers, and her delight was unbounded. She spent hours in arranging her things. She won Flora's genuine applause by her skill and taste in this matter.

Flora bought her a hat.

She looked at it in a queerly detached manner for an instant. "Oh, a hat," she commented. She might have been repeating a word spoken by a travel-lecturer, describing some interesting place which did not seem to concern her. It appeared that she never had owned a hat.

She put it on before the glass. "Oh!" she cried. She thrust impulsive arms about Flora's neck and hugged her.

Flora enjoyed that experience so much that she bought another hat which she described as "un-made." Ribbons of gay colors, and white lace, and little silk flowers of various hues, came with it, and the child was given these materials to experiment with as she pleased. Flora gave advice, and was ready with assistance.

Again the result was interesting. Bonnie May experienced a joy which was rapt, almost tremulous

Bonnie May

in quality. A desert-bred bird, coming upon an oasis, might have regarded its surroundings with the same incredulous rapture.

Baron's room became hers permanently, and here she developed a keen delight in "housekeeping." Here also she received Mrs. Baron and Flora as guests, and amazed them by her performance of the part of hostess.

"I call it nonsense," declared Mrs. Baron to Flora, after the two had paid a formal call. But her face was flushed with happiness and her voice was unwontedly soft.

"Not nonsense," responded Flora; "it's just happiness."

She spent whole afternoons with Mrs. Shepard in the kitchen and dining-room. She learned how to bake little cakes.

It became her duty—by her own request—to set the table, and upon this task she expended the most earnest thought.

Baron commented upon this on one occasion. "Ah, you're not an artist, after all. You're a Gretchen," he said.

"But everything about the table is so pretty and nice," she responded. "It's as elegant as a table in a play, and ever so much more sensible. You know something always happens when you sit down to a table on the stage. A servant comes in and says: 'Beg pardon, mum, but there's a gentleman—he says he's your uncle from Green Bay'—"

Mrs. Baron Takes Up the Gauntlet

and then everybody gets up in a hurry, because the uncle is supposed to believe his niece has a lot of children he's been helping to support, when she hasn't got any at all. Or something like that."

In brief, there were a hundred accumulating evidences to prove that Bonnie May in the Baron household was the right individual in the right place.

It is true that Mrs. Baron did not forget how Thornburg had called on a certain night to take the child away, and how she had given him to understand—she supposed—that she would expect him back on the same errand some other time. And Baron could not free his mind of the fact that he had voluntarily entered into a compact by which his guest must sooner or later be lost to the household at least a part of the time.

But these were matters which were not discussed in the family.

A week passed—two weeks, and Baron hadn't seen Thornburg or communicated with him. One day in June the thermometer shot up in real mid-summer fashion, and the audiences in most of the theatres were such that all the shrewd managers became listless and absent-minded. The "regular season" was over.

Thornburg closed his theatre and turned his attention to a summer resort where there was an opportunity to launch an *al fresco* entertainment scheme. "Everybody was leaving town." There

Bonnie May

remained only the uncounted thousands for whom some lighter form of entertainment must be provided.

The flight of time, the inevitable march of events, brought to Baron a realization of the fact that there was a promise he must keep. And so one day, during an hour in the attic, he spoke to Bonnie May.

She didn't seem to pay any attention at all to his preliminary words. It slowly dawned upon her that what Baron was saying concerned her in a special way.

" . . . people you will be interested in, I am sure," Baron was saying. "Thornburg, the name is." He glanced at her; but the name had made no impression. "Mrs. Thornburg is not very strong, and a cheerful visit ought to be just the thing to help her. Mr. Thornburg is a theatrical man. Why, it was his theatre I met you in. They have a beautiful home."

"Oh, that makes me think," was all the reply he received. "What became of the man who had a play?"

"Eh—a play?"

"You remember—when I first came. He had the first act and read it to you in the library, and I had to go to bed."

"Oh—Baggot. He's probably forgotten all about it by this time. Or writing another that he'll never finish."

Mrs. Baron Takes Up the Gauntlet

She shook her head, unconvinced. "He was so enthusiastic," she objected.

So for the time being there was an end to the discussion of her visit to the Thornburgs.

Another week passed, and then Baron had an extraordinarily busy day.

In the forenoon came a letter from one of the dramatic editors for whom Baron had done special work occasionally.

"They are launching some sort of a dramatic stock enterprise out at Fairyland to-night," the letter ran, "and I'm hoping you can do it for me. Thornburg is managing it. I don't hope it will be much as a dramatic proposition, but you might be able to get some readable impressions. Please let me know."

A later mail brought a communication from Thornburg.

The sight of the manager's signature brought Baron up with a jerk—but he was reassured by the first few lines. Thornburg wasn't charging him with bad faith. Instead, he was enclosing an order for an unlimited number of seats for the Fairyland opening.

"I understand," ran a pencilled line by way of postscript and explanation, "that you are to represent the *Times* to-night."

Also there was a letter from Baggot. Baggot's play had reached a stage where it needed Baron's

Bonnie May

inspection. The budding playwright asked no questions. He merely declared his intention of calling that night.

Baron went up into the attic to look at the morning paper. He wanted to know what they were doing out at Fairyland, and who was doing it.

And while he noted one impressive name after another, he was arrested by an altogether amazing sound down in his mother's sitting-room. Mrs. Baron had been giving Bonnie May her music lesson, and now, the lesson done, she was singing for her pupil.

The thin old voice faltered on some of the notes, but the words came clear enough:

“ . . . She's all the world to me,
And for bonnie Annie Laurie . . . ”

Baron smiled and shook his head.

“What was it,” he mused, “about a plan of reconstruction?”

Then he went down-stairs to telephone his acceptance to the man on the *Times*.

Baggot he completely forgot.

When Baron entered the dining-room at dinner-time that evening Flora looked at him with mild surprise.

“All dressed up and nowhere to go,” said she.

“But there is somewhere to go. I'm going to

Mrs. Baron Takes Up the Gauntlet

write up the Fairyland opening. Would you like to go with me?"

"No, thank you."

It was clearly understood that Baron's question had been put in a spirit of jest. It was understood that Flora and her kind did not go to the Fairylands—and their kind.

But Bonnie May failed to grasp the situation.

"What's Fairyland?" she inquired.

"A large enclosure occupied entirely by mad people, and with a theatre in one corner."

She ignored the reference to mad people. "Oh! a theatre. What are they playing?"

"A piece called 'The Second Mrs. Tanqueray,'" said Baron.

She sat up, swiftly erect, and clasped her hands. "How fine!" was her comment. "Do you think you could take me?"

"I should say not!" Baron responded without thinking. His unthinking refusal was a result of the habitual Baron attitude. But as he regarded her thoughtfully, and noted the puzzled inquiry in her glance, he couldn't quite understand why he had been so emphatic, so confident of being right. "It's not a play a little girl would care for," he added, now on the defensive.

She smiled indulgently. "The idea! I mean, *anybody* would be interested in it."

"What's it about?" challenged Baron.

"A lady who died because they were unkind to

Bonnie May

her—even the people who loved her. It's about a lot of snobs and a—a human being." She spoke with feeling. She sensed the fact that again she was being required to stand alone.

Baron frowned. "How in the world did you find out anything about a play like that?"

"Miss Barry did it in Denver one time--when she was with a stock company. I can't understand why you speak as if there was something wrong about it. I think it's great. You can cry like anything when you see it—because it seems as if what happens couldn't have been helped. It isn't one of those things that's been screwed around to make everybody feel as if they'd been eating caramels. You remember it!"

Baron, Sr., engaged in carving the roast, twinkled somewhat darkly.

"You might get her to shape your criticism for you, Victor," he suggested.

"I don't know if the editor would stand for 'screwed around,'" said Baron, "but upon my soul, I think she's right."

"Well, don't you think you could take me, then?" asked Bonnie May.

"It really isn't possible. You see, I must hurry down to the office right after the performance—to write it, you know."

The child leaned toward Mrs. Baron, a very real shadow trembling on her face. "Couldn't you go, so you could bring me home?" she asked. Her

Mrs. Baron Takes Up the Gauntlet

voice was nearly inaudible, through fear of disappointment. "I haven't been for such a long time. You can't think how dearly I'd like to go."

Mrs. Baron was provoked by the child's intense earnestness. "Oh—impossible!" she said. She noted the look of despair in Bonnie May's eyes. "There wouldn't be enough tickets, anyway," she added weakly.

Baron leaned back in his chair as if he had lost his appetite. What was the matter with them all, anyway, that they were afraid to get down into the crowd once in a while? Plenty of really nice people went to all manner of places—in search of novelty, for diversion, in order to get into touch with mankind. He had spoken of mad persons out at Fairyland. That was merely a silly cynicism. They weren't any madder than other people. Surely they were saner, since they were willing to enjoy the best that life afforded.

"I've got plenty of seats, mother," he said. He returned to his dinner, smiling somewhat maliciously.

"Victor!" exclaimed Mrs. Baron. She flushed angrily. "You know very well I won't go to such a place."

Bonnie May's voice trailed away to a whisper—almost to a whimper. "Nice people can go anywhere they want to go," she said. "It's only silly people who need to be afraid, because they don't know how to think for themselves."

Bonnie May

She tried very hard to eat her dinner then, and to say no more. But presently she said, faintly, "Please excuse me," and ran, weeping in true childish abandon, from the room.

It was the first time she had really lost control over herself!

Baron, Sr., was the first to speak. "She's only a child," he said, as if anything more would be superfluous.

An ensuing silence was broken by the sound of the telephone-bell, and Mrs. Baron was glad to respond, as a means of putting the finishing touches to an uncomfortable episode.

But the telephone seemed only to create other difficulties. The group at the table were quite at a loss to know what could have brought such an extraordinary sharpness into Mrs. Baron's voice. She was soon grasping the receiver angrily, and they heard her saying, with uncomfortable intervals between her words and phrases: "To-night? Bonnie May? Mr. Baron? Why should he do anything of the kind? No, I don't understand at all. No. . . ." She turned around in quick displeasure. "Victor," she appealed, "will you see what they want?"

And Baron hurried to the phone and took up the broken conversation.

"Oh, Mrs. Thornburg!" he began. Then, after a pause, "Yes, that was the understanding. There wasn't any definite time set—" A pause. "Yes,

Mrs. Baron Takes Up the Gauntlet

I know he is. I'm going out there, too." Another pause, and then, "Well, I suppose it might be managed. I'll ask *her*. I promised—we both agreed—that she should do as she pleased——"

He turned back to the table with a brave attempt at briskness. But the inquiring glances bent upon him were disconcerting.

Mrs. Baron went and unceremoniously hung up the receiver. She had, it seemed, understood quite accurately what the person at the other end of the phone had been saying.

"It's an invitation for Bonnie May," said Baron, trying to shake off the feeling that he was a guilty wretch. "Mrs. Thornburg particularly wishes her to come over this evening, because she's to be alone."

"Well!" was Mrs. Baron's comment. "Why should she go over there, I'd like to know?"

Baron hesitated. "The fact is, I entered into a sort of compact with Thornburg——"

"Yes, I gathered something of the kind," said Mrs. Baron angrily. "I suppose I have nothing to say, one way or another."

"It was when you were still of the belief that Bonnie May couldn't be—quite comfortable with us, and Thornburg . . . I don't think I was wholly unjustified in what I promised. You remember you said that as soon as she could be got ready——" He was floundering painfully now, with the eyes of everybody in the room turned upon him accusingly. "Mrs. Thornburg says she has

Bonnie May

a room ready, specially fitted up for her, and she only asks that she may spend the night——”

Mrs. Baron had a vision of that room that had been “specially fitted up” for the child, who was now away somewhere grieving because she had been refused a greatly coveted privilege. No doubt the Thornburg woman had spent whole weeks and no end of money in fitting up that room. And she thought with a sinking heart of the gloom of the mansion, and its threadbare aspects.

“Victor Baron,” she cried angrily, “I wish you would tell me just what agreement you made with that theatre man. I want to know where I stand.”

And Baron explained—or, rather, he failed to explain very clearly. The idea of “a sort of duel” not only failed to delight his auditors as it had delighted Thornburg, but they looked as if they considered it a type of criminal and unseemly folly.

“You see,” persisted Baron, “the Thornburgs are rich people. They may go so far as to adopt Bonnie May, if the thing works out satisfactorily. I know how that sounds, but we’ve got to think of—of *her* interests, as well as our own whims.”

“Whims!” This, witheringly, from Mrs. Baron.

“I think it was mostly whims at first, anyway.”

“You’re speaking for yourself—not for me.”

“And the Thornburgs are not bad people. I don’t see why they shouldn’t make her quite happy. I’m not at all sure we could do as much, if we undertook to keep her here constantly.”

Mrs. Baron Takes Up the Gauntlet

"That," said Mrs. Baron "is your mean way of reminding me of what happened just a little while ago!"

"Oh, no, mother! But she's such a joyous little thing! I think she'll like us all the better for seeing other people once in a while."

Mrs. Baron gazed at her son silently, her face darkening. He realized that her mind was filled with scorn, with resistance, with misgivings. "And I suppose," she said, "that everything in their house is the newest and brightest and costliest!" She enumerated these qualities as if she were pointing out so many of the cardinal sins.

Baron pretended not to understand. "They live nicely," he said. "But as far as Bonnie May is concerned, I don't think you need fear that the things the Thornburgs have will give them any advantage over us."

"Well, I don't want her to go," declared Mrs. Baron.

Baron was standing in indecision when, happily, there was an interruption.

The front door closed rather noisily, as it did when Mrs. Shepard was not in a very good humor, and there was the sound of Baggot's voice in the hall.

Baron groaned. He had forgotten about Baggot. He went out into the hall and confronted the playwright apologetically. "I'd really forgotten," he began, but Baggot cut him short.

Bonnie May

"It's all right," remarked that young man. "Come on up to the library. I needn't keep you long. But it's simply necessary—" He was leading the way up-stairs as if he were in his own house.

"Look here, Baggot," remonstrated Baron, "I've got to go out to-night, in half an hour—in fifteen minutes. You'll have to come back some other night."

"Where you going?"

Baron gasped at the man's rudeness.

"I've got to review a play, out at——"

"Fine! I'll go with you!"

Baron sank into a chair. There really wasn't any reason why Baggot shouldn't go with him. "But I'm going on the street-car," he explained. "We couldn't read a play——"

"It's not ready to be read, most of it. I've only got a couple of acts and the scenario. But there are certain things. . . ." He rolled his chair closer to Baron's and began a longer discussion of his play.

Time passed, and Flora appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were inscrutable. "Mother wishes to see you before you go out," she said.

"Will she come up here?" pleaded Baron. He wanted to hide behind Baggot and escape a further scolding.

"I'll ask her," replied Flora.

Baggot, leaning forward and speaking with great intensity, continued on the subject which obsessed him.

Mrs. Baron Takes Up the Gauntlet

Time flew, and Baron found himself nervously jerking out his watch. Then there was a faint rustle of dresses out in the sitting-room.

Mrs. Baron appeared in the doorway.

She was dressed with all the exquisite, subtle attention to detail which never failed to make Baron proud of her. He took in the quiet, old-fashioned jewelry, sparingly displayed; the softened dignity of costume; the fine severity of her beautiful hair. Surely she was every inch a gentlewoman of whom any son might be proud.

She held Bonnie May, smiling serenely, by the hand.

"I just wanted you to know," she said, standing impressively erect and speaking with quiet resolution, "that we are ready to go to the play."

CHAPTER XIX

BONNIE MAY LOOKS BACK

BAGGOT's play, it seemed, was really a charming thing—a modernized fairy-story.

To the monotonous rumble of revolving car-wheels the plot was outlined, the characters sketched. Baron felt the dramatic force of it, the surprises. But as the enthusiastic playwright proceeded with his self-appointed task, Baron began to realize, also, that he and his companions and their affairs constituted a very queer sort of drama.

By his side sat Baggot, and in front of them were his mother and Bonnie May. Mrs. Baron, for special reasons of her own, was making a studied and persistent effort to be entertaining. She talked to the child almost continuously. But Baron could not help seeing that Bonnie May was determinedly playing a double rôle. She was politely pretending to listen to every word Mrs. Baron said, but she was also keeping one ear eagerly turned toward Baggot.

Baggot, for his part, saw only that Baron seemed to be giving a good deal of his attention to the little girl in the seat ahead. He couldn't make

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any excuse for such division of interest. He began leaning forward at frequent intervals to catch Baron's eye—to see if the points he was making were going home.

Only Mrs. Baron remained in a single-minded mood. She continued to talk amiably, and no doubt a bit wearily. She was determined that Bonnie May should have no ground for complaint that she was not being properly entertained.

"You see," Baggot was saying, "the central figure is an elf, or a sprite, who is supposed to be an embodiment of the good traits in human nature. And then there are witches, and gnomes, and dwarfs, and some big fellows—vikings and Titans and giants—and some figures put in for the sake of—well, variety: druids, and people like that. And Psyche—to make a swell picture. Looking at her reflection, you know. All but the central figure, the sprite, are supposed to embody faulty traits, like cruelty, or vanity, or superstition, or jealousy, or envy, or fear. And then certain other qualities—for comedy effects, like laziness, or stubbornness, or stupidity. See? And the sprite governs them all, little by little, until in the end they turn into fairies, or nice human beings. A great transformation scene. . . ."

Baggot stopped suddenly and frowned. "It sounds childish, telling it. As if it were some silly sort of extravaganza. But there's the dialogue. Smart and unexpected, you know. Modern draw-

Bonnie May

ing-room stuff put up against the heart of the forest and the figures of the story-books. Bringing the sublime and the ridiculous together, you know—and the material and the ideal, and the every-day and the remote. Silly fallacies of our own day, set against the truth in words such as Æsop would have used." He stopped suddenly and threw out his hands in a despairing gesture. "Oh, what's the use?" he demanded. "I can't get at it at all, just talking about it. You'll have to see it in writing."

"I'm sure I understand," Baron reassured him. "You don't put it so vaguely at all. And you know I saw the first act."

"Yes. . . . But I've done that over—ever so much better." He clasped his knee in his hands and fidgeted for a moment. And then he broke out with—"And the settings! The four seasons, in the forest, for the four acts. Big things to hit the eye—but nicely, you know, so that the drama doesn't suffer—so that it's not choked, you might say."

"Yes," said Baron, "I understand."

Baggot began to go more into detail touching the plot. He put this part of it very incisively. Occasionally he laughed, or his eyes blazed with satisfaction. He had reached the end before it was time for them to leave the car.

Bonnie May had seemed to be listening attentively to Mrs. Baron; but once Baron heard her

Bonnie May Looks Back

say, with slight confusion: "I beg your pardon," because she had not responded to a question that had been put to her.

Now, as they were getting ready to leave the car, she nodded her head decisively.

"Why are you nodding?" asked Mrs. Baron. She was frankly irritated.

And the child prevaricated. "Oh, I think it's because I'm—well, satisfied."

The entrance to Fairyland might have been described as a study in chaos. Hundreds of people were pouring into the gates, and they were all coming immediately under the spell of the bedlam of noises and the blaze of lights.

Baron had one moment of grave doubt as he marshalled his party before getting into the vortex of human forms. He thought his mother could not have looked less satisfied with things in general if she had been the Peri of the legend, just turned back from paradise because she hadn't brought the thing that was expected of her.

But Mrs. Baron was playing a game. Rather, she was fighting a battle, and she remarked calmly, in response to Baron's anxious look. "It won't be so bad after we get inside."

"No doubt you're right," replied Baron, and then they all pressed forward.

They got by the gatemen just as a car of the scenic-railway variety was cut loose from its moorings on a high platform to which it had been

Bonnie May

dragged, and began its incredibly swift descent along a far-off vista of trees and lights. Women shrieked as if they were being enveloped in flames, and tried to hold their hats in place.

"Mercy!" was Mrs. Baron's comment; whereupon Baron dropped back a step, and hid his mouth with his hand.

The inrush of persons behind kept them going somewhat smartly past the first group of "attractions": an "old mill-wheel," with an entirely uniform supply of water tumbling down upon its buckets; a shooting-gallery; a negro with terrified, grinning face protruding from a hole in a curtain as a target for a group of men who were throwing baseballs.

A merry-go-round started just as Baron's party passed, and a popular melody was ground out with quite superfluous vehemence. Mrs. Baron paused—startled into making a halt, seemingly—just long enough to catch a glimpse of an elderly couple, a man and a woman, mounted upon two highly colored lions. They were undoubtedly country people, and the woman's expression indicated that she was determined not to betray unfamiliarity with the high life of the city.

Mrs. Baron hadn't even an ejaculation which seemed at all adequate to her needs in this case.

"I think the theatre's over this way," said Baron, steering a course which promised escape from the main currents of the crowd.

Bonnie May Looks Back

Yes, there was the theatre, standing on a knoll with trees growing on its sides. A curved, flower-bordered road led up to its entrance.

Conditions rapidly improved. There weren't nearly so many people, and what there were were of a quieter type.

Half-way up the knoll Baron turned about for a bird's-eye view of the whole place. But beneath them a Midway blazed, and he caught sight of a lady on a platform before a tent, who was coiling a very large snake about her neck, while a little farther away a princess—she seemed to be—in red satin and spangles, sat wearily on a palanquin on top of a camel.

He thought it would be as well for his mother not to see these choicest fascinations of Fairyland. He directed attention to the theatre ahead, which was modelled after what is left of a famous Roman ruin. And so they completed their climb without looking back.

A grove surrounded the theatre, and under the trees there were chairs and tables.

"Chairs!" exclaimed Mrs. Baron. "They're the first thing I've seen. . . ." She turned one about and sat down.

"Fine idea, that," said Baron. "Let's all sit down."

"It's plenty of time to go in when you hear the overture begin," observed Bonnie May; whereat Mrs. Baron regarded her with rather a blank expression; but she said nothing.

Bonnie May

From the portals of the theatre strolled Thornburg, and instantly his glance took in Baron and his party.

It was Baggot who observed that the manager seemed about to join them.

The manager did. He came toward them across the grass and shook hands with Baron. He was smiling almost benignantly.

Baron introduced his party. Thornburg was rather casually cordial in his manner. Then he took in the fact that the child in the party was Bonnie May.

"So this is the little girl?" he inquired. He drew her to his side and flushed with pleasure. His entire appearance changed. "I had an idea she might be over to the house to-night," he added, turning to Baron.

"No," said Baron, "she preferred to come with us."

Bonnie May shrank slightly from the stranger's touch; but after she had regarded him critically she yielded to it. He seemed rather a good sort, she thought. He wasn't loud, and he didn't take things for granted too much.

But Mrs. Baron stiffened and seemed bent upon bringing upon the entire group that discomfort and embarrassment the creation of which is one of the finer social accomplishments. "Sit down, Bonnie May," she said. She patted an unoccupied chair with her hand and smiled. There was some-

Bonnie May Looks Back

thing in her manner which caused Bonnie May to regard her with surprise.

Thornburg, too, observed her rather deliberately. For an instant he seemed to forget himself, to be absent-minded. Thornburg was of that type of man who seems to surrender unconditionally when a woman employs strategies, but who resolves to do what he pleases when her back is turned.

Baron resented his mother's attitude, her decision not to be communicative and gracious. He stood by the manager's side and spoke of the splendid picture the garden presented. For a moment they stood in silence, looking down upon the tangle of many-colored lights which marked the course of the Midway.

The steady stream of people who had been entering the theatre had begun to diminish, and now the notes of the overture arose—the "Poet and Peasant."

Bonnie May sprang to her feet. "There it is," she said, and both Baron and Thornburg smiled down on her. Then Thornburg escorted the party into the theatre.

Baron noted the immense audience, sitting in a blaze of light; a fairly quiet and pleasant-appearing audience. He noted, too, that where one might have expected to find walls at right and left there were vast open spaces, through which stars, beyond waving horizontal branches, were visible. Rolled canvas, which might be let down in case of

Bonnie May

rain, rattled slightly in the breeze, and one or two disturbed sparrows darted into the place and rested, chirping, on a girder overhead.

Then Baron had eyes only for Bonnie May, who had undergone some strange sort of transformation the moment she had entered the theatre.

Her eyes were enough to thrill an ordinary world-weary person. Her color became brilliant. Then her body began to respond to some overmastering influence. One might have thought of her as a little palfrey about to enter a great parade with many bands in it. She was not merely proud and happy; she was quite entranced with delight.

When the usher, with the manner of his kind, darted down the aisle until he was some eight or ten steps in advance of the party, the child hurried forward a little, and then turned about, her face alight with eagerness; and suddenly she stood still until Mrs. Baron came up to her, and seized that amazed lady's hand and laid her cheek against it and patted it rapidly.

"It's all right, child," whispered Mrs. Baron warningly, in dread of a scene; but her voice was like a caress, and her eyes were beaming with joy. She was thinking how little she had had to sacrifice, and how very well worth while the sacrifice had been. Truly, it would have been cruel to deprive the child of a pleasure which meant so much to her.

The man who stood with his big bass fiddle in

Bonnie May Looks Back

the orchestra pit was making a dreadful noise on one string—sawing it rapidly—when the usher flung down a row of seats. Mrs. Baron went in first, followed by Bonnie May. Baron took the next seat, leaving the aisle seat to Baggot.

The overture ended, and the orchestra leader laid down his baton, while he and his musicians began to adjust themselves in easy positions in their chairs.

Somewhere a man at a switchboard performed his duty, and one light after another went out until the theatre was in darkness.

Then the curtain lifted.

But to Baron it all meant less the story of Paula Tanqueray, up there on the stage, than it did the story of Bonnie May, close by his side. Tanqueray's friends discussed his approaching marriage and his bride to be; the argument of the drama received its simple statement, and presently the ill-starred woman appeared. But through it all Baron knew that his thoughts were chiefly with the child by his side.

She was so completely lost in the rapture of every passing moment that he felt a strange uneasiness. Here was something more than a normal enjoyment. She had the extraordinary gift of being able to appraise the value of the make-believe—to gauge the truth of every look and word and movement, and at the same time to lose herself in the story. She clasped and unclasped her hands in silent,

Bonnie May

painful intensity; there were little, strange movements of her head as a result of her acute sympathy with the work of the playwright and players alike. And sometimes she hung upon a word that halted, and smiled with rapture when a difficulty was surmounted.

Baron thought, grotesquely enough, of a little fish fallen from a hook into the grass for a breathless moment, and then getting back into its proper element and rushing away with a mighty flicking of tail and fins.

Bonnie May had been of the theatre once, and Baron realized, as he watched her, that somehow, sometime, she would return to it again.

When, at the end, the report of a pistol was heard, and the stepdaughter of Mrs. Tanqueray came screaming upon the stage, Mrs. Baron set her lips in a hard line.

"Nobody to blame but herself!" was her comment. She, too, had been deeply impressed by the play.

But the larger faith of the little girl asserted itself. "Oh, don't say that!" she begged. "She'd have been all right, if they'd really loved her in spite of all!"

It was the reality of it that held her, Baron perceived—or her ability to see it as something real.

The puppets, the make-believe—these were off the stage, for Bonnie May. The truth and beauty and reality were on it.

Bonnie May Looks Back

He smiled thoughtfully as they all filed up the aisle, amid a babble of voices. The child might be wrong; but was it strange that so glorious an ignis fatuus should have power to lead her on to the end?

As they left the theatre they passed Thornburg, standing near the entrance alone. For an instant there was a peculiar, inscrutable expression in his eyes; then he pulled himself together and smiled and lifted his hat. But after this perfunctory greeting was over, the manager steadily regarded Mrs. Baron, who did not look at him.

That quiet, masked glance made Baron uncomfortable, and instinctively he stooped and took Bonnie May firmly by the hand.

In another moment they were lost in the throng.

CHAPTER XX

CONCERNING LAUGHTER

THE next afternoon Baron received a very cordial letter from Thornburg. The manager was delighted with the fine account of the Fairyland opening that had been printed in the *Times*. That was the sum and substance of his letter. There was nothing about the compact to which Baron was a party.

"Just the same, he's got something up his sleeve," Baron mused. And his next thought was: "But I've kept my word. If she doesn't want to go there's no reason why I should urge her to. She's getting along all right where she is."

Two weeks slipped by, and then one day at noon as Baron was emerging from the lobby of the *Times* building he heard a familiar voice in the street. The Thornburg automobile stopped and the manager pushed the door open.

"Been to lunch yet?" called Thornburg.

"Just going," was the response. Baron would have prevaricated if he'd had time to think; but now it was too late and he made the best of the matter as Thornburg pulled him into the car.

Concerning Laughter

"Come with me," said the manager, and then he became silent as he threaded the machine through the down-town congestion.

He did not speak again until they were in a comparatively quiet restaurant whose patronage was drawn chiefly from theatrical people who did not come in until late in the evening.

Both men observed that they were to have the place practically to themselves, and then Baron was promptly given to understand what it was that Thornburg wanted.

"That's really a fine little girl," said the manager, frankly regarding Baron across the table.

"You mean Bonnie May. Yes, she certainly is. The fact is, you can't begin to realize how uncommonly fine she is until you know her better."

"Well, that's just the point. When *am* I going to know her better? When is she coming to us?"

Baron gave his whole attention to the waiter for a minute. He was trying to think of a response that wouldn't concede too much. He held the strong cards now. It would be foolish to relinquish them.

The waiter was gone now.

"The fact is, Thornburg," said Baron, "she doesn't seem at all eager to accept your invitation. I've told her about it, and explained what a fine place you've got, and all that—and she just changes the subject. You know I didn't agree to force her to act. That's just what we both agreed not to do."

Bonnie May

"Childish timidity—the first time," said Thornburg. "If you'd bring her over once she'd get over feeling that way."

"She's just about as timid as a sunbeam. She'd go anywhere if she thought she'd enjoy it. The fact is, she's absolutely satisfied where she is, at present. Let the matter rest awhile. When things become monotonous I'll call her attention again to your invitation."

Thornburg shook out his napkin violently. "That sounds like beating about the bush," he said. "You know how to get a child started. 'Oh, look!' you say to them. Get them excited. Then they'll do anything."

"I don't want to get her excited," replied Baron dryly.

"Yes, that's just it!" retorted the other. "A little excitement would be good for her. I see the advantage of having her at your place part of the time, but I see the advantage of having her with us, too. It would be a shame if she ever got to thinking highly of some of this polite flubdub—" He checked himself in embarrassment and brushed imaginary crumbs from his waistcoat.

"Won't you enlighten me as to what you mean by 'polite flubdub'?"

Thornburg became almost defiant. "Being chilly, for one thing. And not seeing people. That kind of business. It used to be all right, but it's out of date now. Class distinctions and that sort of

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thing—that's all done away with. You might as well hang a knitted tidy up in an art display. Nothing but the goods counts these days."

"No doubt you're right," responded Baron briefly. He felt it would be impossible for him to admit that he saw any special application in what Thornburg had said.

A silence followed. Baron permitted a considerable degree of arrogance to stifle his friendlier thoughts. Thornburg had spoken offensively; which was rather less excusable than "polite flub-dub."

Yet, Baron reflected, nothing in Thornburg's manner could alter the fact that it might be greatly to Bonnie May's advantage to accept the hospitality of the manager and his wife.

The impression of the child in the theatre not long ago recurred to him—the imperative call upon her which the skill of the players had exerted.

"You're right, Thornburg," he said finally. "I've been procrastinating—that's all. I'll speak to her again. The next time I'll even say 'Oh, look!'—or words to that effect. In your own expressive phrase, we'll give her a chance to decide which of us 'has the better attraction to offer.'"

This new promise weighed heavily on his conscience that afternoon when he went home; for Bonnie May, unusually radiant, was waiting for him at the door.

Bonnie May

"Mr. Baggot was here to-day," she began. "He left his play. And he talked to me about it. He said you might keep it as long as you liked."

"All very kind of Mr. Baggot." Baron thoughtfully disposed of his hat and cane. When he turned to the child again there was a little furrow between his eyes.

"Bonnie May," he began, "do you remember my telling you some time ago that Mr. and Mrs. Thornburg would be glad to have you visit them?"

"Yes, I remember."

"They thought possibly you might have forgotten. They asked me to remind you."

"Thank you. And he's made the prettiest copy of it, with red lines drawn under the words you don't have to learn. Can't we go up-stairs and see it? I put it in your room."

"Yes, we'll go up-stairs." He was irritated by her supreme indifference to the matter which he had tried to bring to her attention. He meant to have this thing out definitely.

She rushed away in advance of him so impetuously that he paused and looked after her in amazement. The furrow disappeared and he was smiling.

And then the whole strange situation struck him with renewed force. Was she really the daughter of Thornburg, and was he afraid to claim her? Or was there no connection at all between her and the manager, and did he, Baron, hold the trump-cards

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in that game which meant the permanent possession of her?

If she were Thornburg's, why shouldn't Mrs. Thornburg frankly say to her husband: "I know everything—but I still want her"? It occurred to him that it might be his duty to suggest just that course to her. But old habits of restraint were too strong for him. After all, he didn't know the Thornburgs very well. He scarcely knew Mrs. Thornburg at all.

Moreover, "it was a very pretty quarrel as it stood." He had been frank and aboveboard every step of the way. If others could not or would not be so, that was no concern of his.

He went up into the attic, which was made golden by a flood of late afternoon sunlight. In truth he found himself in an atmosphere that was delightful in its warmth and aloofness and quietude.

Bonnie May hurried toward him, the manuscript in her hands. She was trembling with eagerness. A foolish little creature in some respects, surely, thought Baron.

He glanced at the title-page and turned half a dozen pages aimlessly. And when he glanced at Bonnie May he was amazed by her expression of wonder, of distress.

"You don't seem to be interested in it!" said she.

"Not a great deal—just now. I'd have to get

Bonnie May

into it, you know. When I've more time. Besides," he tossed the manuscript aside, "I'm deeply interested in something else just now."

She quickly evinced a pretty spirit of submission. In response to his gesture she sat down near the window, opposite him.

"I've been thinking about you to-day. Seriously."

"I hope I haven't been queering anything?"

"Not a bit of it. We're all very much pleased with you."

There may have been something of patronage in the tone. At any rate, she replied with a little smile: "Thank you. You know an artist always strives to please." As he regarded her quietly she added more earnestly: "It's strange that I got by, too, when you come to think about it. I was hardly prepared to play a nice part when I came here. Anyway, not a part where you have to have so much—what the critics call restraint. You can take it from me, the nice parts aren't half as fat as the nasty parts."

He did not remove his eyes from her face. He had the thought that she was very far away from him, after all. From all of them. "I wish," he said, "you wouldn't always talk as if you were only taking part in a play. Somehow it doesn't seem quite friendly. We're trying to make this a real home for you. We're trying to be real friends. We're trying to live a real life. Why not look at it

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that way when you're with me? Wouldn't that seem friendlier?"

She looked at him with a little flicker of anxiety in her eyes. "You see," she said, "I can't help thinking all the time that everything I do must be like a nice ingénue part, and being afraid that you'll come home some day and find I've been doing some soubrette stuff."

He shook his head and abruptly assumed a new attitude. "Did you understand me clearly when I said that Mrs. Thornburg wishes you to visit her?"

"I think I didn't pay much attention," she admitted, looking away from him. "Did you—wish me to go?"

"I think it would be very nice. If you didn't like them, you needn't ever go again." He tried to speak lightly.

She brought her eyes to his now, anxiously. "When did you think I ought to go?" she asked.

Baron brought his chair down with a bump. "I didn't say you ought to go, exactly. Don't put it that way. I only thought it would be nice and kind of you to go, because they wish it. I'd be anxious to have you come back quite soon, of course."

"And—and mother: does she wish me to go, too?"

Her use of that word brought warmth to his heart. "She doesn't wish it. Frankly, I think she

Bonnie May

wouldn't like it at all. But I think she'd consent."

She was greatly relieved. She leaned forward and patted him on the knee. "I was afraid you might be planning to cut down the company," she said.

He looked at her without comprehending readily.

"I mean," she elaborated, "I thought maybe it was a case of cold feet."

He flinched. "Oh, Bonnie May!" was his disapproving rejoinder.

"You mean it's stale?" she asked. The expression in her eyes was innocent, perplexed.

He slowly shook his head in despair, and then he saw the swift look of comprehension that brightened her eyes.

"Oh, I know," she said. "Knock-about talk!"

He sprang to his feet and thrust his chair aside. "For a few moments I would be very glad if we might use the English language," he said. "I was hopeful of arriving at an understanding with you on a certain simple proposition."

She began to laugh unrestrainedly, after an instant of shocked silence. She "stared him out of countenance," as the saying is. He had never heard her laugh so hilariously. Yet even then he could not be blind to the look of appeal in her eyes—appeal, mingled with a defiant consciousness of guilt.

Then she became grave and conciliatory. "I'll

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go," she said. "It's nothing, after all. I think I get you. They've been after you, and you don't want to be bothered any more. I think we ought to get it over with as soon as possible."

"We might go over this evening, immediately after dinner," he suggested.

She fidgeted. "But you know I'll have to come back to-morrow in time to practise my music lesson?" she stipulated.

Here was the opportunity to prove his complete fairness—to Thornburg. "There's a piano over there. You can practise there, if you care to."

"No, I'm coming back. I have to take a lesson from Flora, too—and give *her* a lesson."

Baron didn't know what she was talking about.

"Flora is giving me lessons in reading," she explained. "You know I'm to go to school next fall."

"No one had mentioned it to me. But of course you will. Everybody goes to school. And about giving *her* a lesson?" he added weakly.

"I'm not sure I ought to talk about that. But why not—to you? You see, I'm teaching her how to laugh."

Baron stared. "Teaching *her* how to *laugh!*" he echoed.

She was immediately on the defensive. "I certainly am. You must have seen that she doesn't know how!"

"Nonsense! You're talking just plain nonsense!"

Bonnie May

"You might think so. A good many people would. But I wish you would tell me how many people you know who really laugh right."

"Right! There's no question of laughing *right*. People laugh when there's an occasion for laughing."

"They don't really laugh, because they don't know how. And very few people know anything about the right occasion to laugh."

"Meaning——"

"I can make it quite plain. You see, it's a custom to teach children how to talk, and some are taught how to sing. I say nothing about the silly things that are taught to 'speak pieces,' Heaven help them. They are taught these things because they wouldn't know how to do them right if they were left to themselves. They try to talk and they try to sing, and they get it all wrong. And then they are taught."

"That's an entirely different matter."

"Not at all. When they try to laugh they get it all wrong, too, but nobody thinks it's necessary to teach them any better. You can see I'm perfectly right."

"I think what you say is quite absurd."

"It's just new to you, that's all. You know perfectly well that when most people try to laugh what they really do is to cackle, or giggle, or shriek, or make horrible noises until they nearly choke. Women try not to cry, because it makes them look ugly."

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But just think how some people look when they laugh. All they need is a few lessons at the right time. Then they know how to laugh naturally and freely. You have to think how you are doing it at first. Afterward you laugh the right way without thinking at all."

" 'Ladies and gentlemen, I take pleasure in introducing Mlle. Bonnie May, laughing expert,' " said Baron derisively.

"A very fine argument," responded Bonnie May, nodding graciously. "And about the 'occasion' to laugh," she persisted seriously. "There's a whole lot to be said about that. You frame up a speech with a lot of care—to get out of a scrape, or to make people do something they don't want to do—or for something like that. You ought to laugh on the same principle. Yet when most people tell you about laughing at anything they put it this way: 'I couldn't help laughing!' You know you smile sometimes when you don't mean it, just to help things along; or you say you pity people, or you say something to encourage them, for the same reason. In the same way, you ought to laugh sometimes when you're not really amused. If you are downhearted or afraid you can hide it by laughing. And you can make people take a sensible view of things sometimes, just by laughing at them. But of course, you have to know how to do it right. If you bray at them, or giggle, they'll be insulted, naturally."

Bonnie May

Baron shook his head. "Where did you pick it all up?" he asked.

"I didn't 'pick it up,' exactly. Miss Barry took particular pains to teach it to me. On account of my work mostly. And I thought a lot of it out for myself."

Before Baron had time to make any response to her she sprang to her feet and picked up the neglected manuscript. All her interests were immediately centred in it.

She turned a dozen pages rapidly. Then she paused in indecision and turned back a page or two. She was anxiously searching.

"Here it is!" she cried. She was much relieved. "Please read that to me." She indicated a sentence.

Baron perceived that it was a longish passage—a grandiloquent flight which he read shamefacedly.

She stopped him on the word "harbinger." "That's the word," she said. "Say that again."

He complied.

"What does it mean?" she wanted to know.

He had scarcely started to explain when she exclaimed, "Oh, I see! Go on."

A voice interrupted them: Mrs. Shepard, announcing that dinner was ready.

On the way down-stairs Bonnie May amazed Baron by repeating in its entirety the passage he had read to her—"harbinger," and all. "It's pretty, isn't it?" said she.

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In the lower hall Flora joined them. Baron glanced at her mischievously. "I've been learning a little something about the dark deeds that are going on around me," he said.

And Flora, as she preceded the other two into the dining-room, lifted her face slightly and laughed in a manner so musical and mellow that Baron looked after her in amazement.

He felt Bonnie May's hand tugging at his, and looking at her he perceived that she had laid one finger across her lips in warning.

He understood. He wanted to laugh, too. But he realized that he did not know how, and that, moreover, this was not the proper occasion.

CHAPTER XXI

AN EXIT AND AN ENTRANCE

It was rather a pity that Bonnie May yielded to an impulse to go out and have a little talk with Mrs. Shepard after she had finished her dinner.

It was a pity, because she also yielded to an impulse to talk confidentially to the sympathetic old servant, and as a result she received an entirely erroneous impression.

"I'm going away for a visit," said Bonnie May, by way of opening.

"A visit!" repeated Mrs. Shepard. "Why, ain't you here just for a visit?"

"Oh—yes! Of course!" was the response, given rather blankly.

"You mean you're going for a visit somewhere else."

"Yes, that's what I mean."

There was silence for a time, while Bonnie May tried to realize the full truth of what Mrs. Shepard had said. Yes, she was merely a visitor in the mansion, certainly. And they had probably been regarding her in that light all the time.

A fear she had entertained earlier in the day recurred to her. "And I expect they may be getting tired of me," she threw out tentatively.

An Exit and an Entrance

Mrs. Shepard was what is usually called a sensible woman. "Oh, well," she replied, "you know how that is. When you are a visitor, people always treat you politely, but, of course, they expect you not to wear your welcome out."

"Of course," assented Bonnie May. She didn't permit Mrs. Shepard to see that she had suddenly grown horribly uncomfortable.

"You know, when people see too much of each other, they—they get tired of each other," added the sensible servant.

"The most natural thing in the world," agreed Bonnie May. She felt that she suddenly hated Mrs. Shepard with a dreadful hatred. She did not at all realize that Mrs. Shepard was innocently laying down a general proposition which she had no thought of applying to any one in particular.

Still, she meant to behave graciously. "If I should ever come back again, you won't mind if I come out and bake a little cake once in a while?" she asked. She was achieving her most friendly smile.

Mrs. Shepard turned toward her with energy. "I certainly won't," she declared. There were no general propositions in her mind now. She was saying to herself: "Was there ever such a cunning little thing?" "And I do hope you'll come back—soon!" she added.

Bonnie May nodded brightly and entered the dining-room. She paused to adjust an article or

Bonnie May

two on the table. She tried to assume the manner of one who is quite light-hearted. She was preparing herself to play her part properly when she joined the family up-stairs.

They were all assembled in the sitting-room, and each was silent and self-centred when Baron dropped the evening paper to the floor and addressed Bonnie May when she entered the room, in the manner of one who has forgotten something.

"You're not ready to go with me to the Thornburgs'," he said. "You know we ought to be starting before long."

The effect of this casual utterance was quite electrifying. The elder Baron dropped his paper, also, and removed his glasses. Flora, searching through a box of letters with some more or less definite end in view, permitted several envelopes with their contents to slip to the floor. She turned a gaze of marked disfavor upon her brother. Mrs. Baron merely swallowed with difficulty and looked decidedly uncomfortable.

Bonnie May felt the tension in the atmosphere. They were trying to be nice and polite about it, she decided. "I only have to put my hat on," she said. She succeeded wholly in creating the impression that she was delighted with their planning, as usual.

Mrs. Baron arose with a little tremor in her limbs. Her attitude became that of one who is tenderly maternal and pathetically old. She bent

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over and took the child's hands in hers. "My dear," she said, "are you quite sure you are willing to go?"

Bonnie May looked into her eyes and smiled. She was grateful for this proof of kindness. They were the nicest people, truly! They weren't going to permit her to feel offended. "Oh, yes!" she said brightly.

Mrs. Baron released her hands and turned away.

"I think it will be very nice to go," added Bonnie May. "You know, when people see too much of one another, they—they get tired of one another!"

"I dare say!" responded Mrs. Baron. She was determined the ungrateful little thing shouldn't see how wounded she was. "Well, if you're to go to the Thornburgs, I ought to see that you are presentable."

She and the child disappeared, Mrs. Baron leading the way and Bonnie May looking back over her shoulder with a smile.

"Extraordinary!" said the elder Baron.

"She's certainly a puzzle to me," said Baron. "Maybe the Thornburgs can do better with her."

"Oh, don't judge her just by that one tactless speech!" exclaimed Flora. "Don't forget what a little thing she is."

Then silence fell in the room, and the typical Baron existence was maintained until the mistress of the house returned, guiding Bonnie May serenely before her—Bonnie May in her best dress, and in

Bonnie May

a saucy straw hat decorated with silk pansies, and with a ridiculous little hand-satchel depending from her hooked forefinger.

"All right," said Baron, leading the way toward the stairs. He had an idea that words had better be used sparingly.

But at the door the departing guest turned for a last look, and instead of the masks of affable politeness she expected to behold there was instead a look of unmistakable regret on every face. Regret which amounted to actual grief, so far as Mrs. Baron and Flora were concerned.

Surely they weren't glad to see her go! There must be a mistake. . . .

She clasped her hands and leaned forward in an attitude of great earnestness. "You know how I love you!" she cried. Her voice almost failed her.

Mrs. Baron came forward, all her resentment gone. "Indeed, we do," she declared. "There, you're not to go away feeling badly. I'm very sorry you feel that you ought to go. And we'll be very anxious to have you come back as soon as you possibly can."

"Oh, thank you so much!" She lifted impulsive arms to Mrs. Baron's neck and hugged her. She looked back at the others, and they could see that there was happiness in her eyes as well as tears.

Then she was gone, in Baron's wake. The sound of her voice, anxiously questioning, drifted up the

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stairs until it was suddenly quieted by the closing of the front door.

"I'm afraid we'll have to go out on a street-car," said Baron. "When you want to come back, the Thornburgs will probably send you in an automobile."

She clasped her hands. "Fine!" said she.

Baron frowned—a fact which she remarked. "I wasn't thinking about the automobile," she hastened to assure him.

"Why the unconcealed rapture, then?"

"Oh, I thought you might be starting out to lose me, as you would a cat or a dog, you know. I'm glad there'll be a way for me to get back."

Baron refused to see any humor in her remark. "I wish you'd quit looking at it like that," he said. "Some day you'll understand better why I think it is a good thing for you to be friendly with the Thornburgs. Just now you may rest assured that we're going to miss you." He realized that he was being rather serious, and he tried to end his observations more cheerfully. "And whenever it pleases you to honor us with your presence again, you'll find the latch-string, et cetera, et cetera."

There was a very pleasant old garden at the rear of the Thornburg residence—a fairly roomy region of old trees and vines and rustic seats and dreams. In the midst of this sylvan scene stood a very old, friendly apple-tree, and beneath this, in

Bonnie May

the evening dusk through which Baron and Bonnie May were escorted out into the garden, sat Mrs. Thornburg.

Thornburg had received them, and it was his idea that it would be a fine thing for the two guests to take Mrs. Thornburg unawares.

She regarded the visitors rather wearily at first as they emerged from the shadows and stood before her. Then she recognized Baron, and her face brightened wonderfully. There was a child with him, and of course it would be *the* child.

She arose from her many-cushioned seat and leaned a little forward, while Bonnie May regarded her with earnest eyes.

"You see, we're here!" said Baron, trying to strike a light and cheerful note.

Mrs. Thornburg scarcely seemed to notice him. "Yes," she said dreamily. She did not remove her eyes from Bonnie May's.

It was the child who completed her scrutiny first. She glanced about her appraisingly. "A very beautiful exterior you have here," she remarked, somewhat loftily.

Mrs. Thornburg smiled rapturously at this. A warm hue stole into her cheeks.

"I'm glad you like it," she said. She glanced at Baron now, with joyous wonder in her eyes. "We think it's pretty," she added. "It might make you think of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tales, mightn't it?" It was plain that she was feeling

An Exit and an Entrance

her way cautiously. "We might imagine we were the children who played under the juniper-tree—though I'm not sure an apple-tree would pass for a juniper-tree."

Bonnie May nodded amiably. "Or it might remind you of a Shakespeare setting," she suggested.

The woman regarded her anew with a look of wonder, and pique, and delight; and then it was evident that she had reached the limits of her restraint. With hands that trembled she drew the child slowly toward her, until she had the radiant face pressed against her breast.

"Dear child, do try to love me, won't you?" she pleaded, and Baron saw that her face twitched, and that her eyes were offering a prayer to the soft sky in which the first stars of evening were just blossoming.

Then, almost stealthily, he left them.

Baggot was waiting for him in front of the house when he reached home. To be exact, the young playwright was sitting on the front step, nervously puffing a cigarette.

"What took you out this time in the evening?" he demanded.

"I've been taking Bonnie May for a visit."

"Oh!—her. I wanted to ask you. Who is she?"

Baron was unlocking the door. "Her name is Bonnie May," he said.

Bonnie May

"Oh, I know that. I mean, who is she? A grandchild, or something?"

"I haven't any grandchildren. Suppose we go into the house."

"I don't see why I shouldn't know who she is. It seems a pity to me that you can't say something." Baggot threw his cigarette into the street and followed Baron into the house and up into the attic. Arrived there he renewed his attack.

"While it seems improbable that you can add anything to the very explicit account you have given me of Bonnie May, I'd like to say that I'm curious to know who she is."

Baron turned upon him quietly. "In view of your unchallengeable right to ask questions about a guest who happens to be in this house, I will explain that she is an actress by profession, and that being out of an engagement just now, she is accepting our hospitality."

Baggot was undisturbed. He exclaimed: "Well, I thought——!"

"You thought——?"

"That I recognized her! Her ways, I mean. You could tell there was something about her. . . ."

"Well," concluded Baron, "now let's see what's up." He had turned on the light, and now he shoved a chair in Baggot's direction.

"What do you think of the play?" demanded Baggot.

"I haven't read it yet."

An Exit and an Entrance

Baggot laughed lamely and his whole bearing expressed contempt. "You don't seem to be at all excited about it!" he complained.

Baron made no response to that. He was wondering where Baggot got his enthusiasm for things.

"Well, the point is," continued the other, "I've got a producer, and it's to be put on right away. Over at the Palace. They've got a summer stock company, you know. They're going to give it a trial performance."

Baron was surprised. "I congratulate you," he said. "I supposed such things were pretty hard to manage."

Baggot explained with complete frankness. "I know that. You see, I've got an uncle who is financially interested in the Palace. He's got confidence in me—in this play, anyway. He made them give me a trial. And that's all I ask for. It'll go like wild-fire. You'll see."

He had lighted another cigarette and was puffing nervously. "Where is it?" he demanded. And when the manuscript was placed in his hands he drew nearer to the light. With smoke curling up into his eyes he began to read aloud. He held his head askew, to escape the smoke.

Baron leaned back, his face in shadow, and curiously studied the intense manner of his companion.

Baggot read: fitfully, speedily, with an occasional aside, which he dropped entirely when he got well

Bonnie May

into the action of the drama. There was something of impersonation in his manner as he read now one character's lines and now another's. He put so much interest into the reading that it seemed almost like acting. And presently Baron began to see vivid pictures. He was carried into a strange, pleasant atmosphere. He was delighted by quaint, unexpected bits of dialogue. He perceived, little by little, the trend of the whimsical philosophy.

He could scarcely believe that this was Baggot's work. He forgot to take account of time. And when the last act was finished, he found that he had risen to his feet.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "Splendid!"

Baggot thrust the manuscript from him and turned to the other with brilliant, triumphant eyes.

"No fault to find with that," he challenged. In another moment he had left the room, and was hurrying down the stairs and away from the house, too excited to contain himself.

The manuscript remained where it had fallen.

Late the next afternoon Baron returned from a day's work in the *Times* office.

He was thinking of Baggot's play. He meant to read it for himself—to see how much he had been influenced the day before by Baggot's almost hypnotic enthusiasm.

He went up into the attic room—and there, much to his amazement and delight, he was confronted by Bonnie May.

An Exit and an Entrance

She blushed with confusion and looked at him almost guiltily.

"Back so soon!" he exclaimed.

"Why, it seemed to me I was away quite a long time."

"Well, yes—I suppose I've been rather busy." He looked about for the manuscript, which seemed to have been removed. "Did you find it pleasant at the Thornburgs'?" he asked. He was succeeding now in getting back his habitual, quiet manner.

"Oh, yes. Quite pleasant."

"That's nice. I somehow imagined they might persuade you to stay a little longer."

"No, when I said I ought to be coming home, she sent to the garage and had the automobile brought around for me."

Baron nodded. "And she wasn't disappointed, then?"

"She was very nice about it. She asked me to come again. She told the man that any time I telephoned to him he might come with the machine and get me—here, you know. Any afternoon. It seems Mr. Thornburg never uses the machine in the afternoons, and she doesn't care for it herself. She was just as nice as she could be. And of course I'm going back. But you know I really belong here."

"Yes, certainly," assented Baron. "Yes, I understand that." He was still a bit puzzled. He added tentatively: "Wasn't everything very beautiful there?"

Bonnie May

"Beautiful? In what way?"

"The house—the grounds—everything."

"Oh—the settings! Yes, they were quite pretentious. But they never count for so much, really. It is the action and the dialogue that really count. And I like the action and the dialogue here much better."

CHAPTER XXII

BAGGOT'S PLAY

WHEN you are told that you have only to telephone to a certain garage, and a very fine, large automobile will be sent around to your house, entirely at your service, a very strong temptation has been placed in your way.

Bonnie May could scarcely believe that she could achieve so much by a mere word or two over the telephone, and it was not at all surprising that she experimented within a day or two after her first visit to the Thornburg home.

The automobile came with almost incredible promptness, and a chauffeur who had the gallant bearing of a soldier did everything but fling a cloak on the ground for Bonnie May to walk on.

She called rather briefly and formally on Mrs. Thornburg on this occasion, but the experience had its special, delighting excitements. The experiment was repeated frequently, and the truth must be recorded that before long Bonnie May was spending her time more or less equally between the mansion and the Thornburg home.

She became something of a personage during those days.

Baggot called on Baron one afternoon, and upon

Bonnie May

being informed that Baron was out, he asked for Bonnie May, and spent fully an hour with her, leaving her in a high state of complacency.

The next day he called again, and this time he did not ask for Baron. He came, he said, to call on Bonnie May.

But this time she was not in. She spent a good part of her time as the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Thornburg, Baggot was told—which indicates clearly enough how the status of affairs had changed.

Baggot made a note of this information and went away in a thoughtful mood.

The members of the Baron family considered these developments without commenting upon them very much at first. But one day Baron, Sr., took occasion to express an opinion.

"It seems strange to have a mere infant passing between two houses like a bird between two trees," he said. This was thought to be his mild way of expressing disapproval.

"It's Victor's arrangement," replied Mrs. Baron. This response was made less inadequate by the way her eyebrows went up.

"The fact is," declared Flora, "we've all fallen in love with the saucy little thing."

"Well?" inquired Mrs. Baron truculently.

"I mean, I don't think Victor's idea is a bad one at all. She's—well, the kind that do extraordinary things when they grow up. We may be glad enough to be in a position where we can 'get from under' one of these days."

Baggot's Play

"I'm thinking of our responsibility," was her mother's rejoinder.

"Yes, so am I. Suppose she made up her mind to be an actress again? The Thornburgs would be just the right kind of friends for her if she did—and Victor says they are very good people. But having an actress in the house—in *our* house—would be like having a cub bear for a pet. They're cunning enough when they're little, but there comes a time when you have to telephone the zoo, or turn in a riot call."

"You ought to be ashamed!" cried Mrs. Baron. "I'm sure she's a good child—a very good child."

The word "reconstruction" came to Flora's mind, but she didn't say anything about it. She only smiled, rather tantalizingly, and added: "Just the same, I believe in cyclone cellars."

So it became no uncommon thing for a huge car to stop before the mansion. "For me!" Bonnie May would exclaim on these occasions; whereupon she would hurry into jacket and hat, and eagerly clasp Mrs. Baron and Flora about the neck, and hurry with real childish eagerness as far as the front door, after which she would demurely cross the sidewalk and take her place in the car with the air of any sedate lady of fashion.

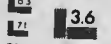
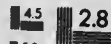
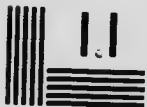
The first little unpleasantness between Bonnie May and Baron arose very soon after this series of irregular exits and entrances began.

"While I think of it," said Baron casually, ad-



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Bonnie May

dressing the child, "I want to provide a—a fund for you." He smiled amiably. "See?" He took a quantity of change from his pocket and placed it in a vase. "Whenever you go calling it will be proper for you to put something into your purse. For tips, perhaps. Or for something of that kind. I am sure a young lady ought to have a little money."

Bonnie May looked curiously into his smiling face, which seemed to have been transformed for the moment into a mask. "I don't believe I would bother about that," she replied.

"I'm not bothering." Baron's smile stiffened slightly. "I merely wish you to have what you want."

"But Mrs. Thornburg always gives me money."

The smile vanished. "That's very good of Mrs. Thornburg, certainly. But when you are in our house you won't need her money. When you're starting out, from this end of the route, you'll find money in the vase."

She looked at him intently, not quite understanding the unfriendly note in his voice. "I believe you are jealous!" she said.

"You see too much," rejoined Baron resentfully.

"It isn't that. You show too much!"

"Of course, I ought to be grateful for criticism from such a source!"

She regarded him with wonder, her eyes filling

Baggot's Play

with tears." "You've no right to speak to me like that. You know I don't need any money. You have all been so generous. . . . And it's only because Mrs. Thornburg isn't well, and because I don't know her as well as I know you that I took money from her. She was so happy giving it to me. It would have been rude for me to refuse. But here—here I've been with friends!"

She brushed the tears from her eyes and ran from the room. As in other times of stress, Mrs. Shepard and the kitchen became her refuge.

Baron looked after her with an assumption of idle curiosity, but when he heard a distant door close his expression changed to real concern. He was dismayed when he thought how deeply he had wounded the child. He was aware of a sudden resentment against the Thornburgs. He sat down and gazed abstractedly at the carpet. He realized after a time that he was studying the meaningless outlines of a figure in faded colors. "We need a new carpet," he mused. "We need everything new. And the only new thing we've got hold of in years is discovering that everything in the house, including ourselves, is threadbare, and respectable—and ugly."

Then he realized that Bonnie May had come back into the room and that she was almost impatiently trying to thrust her hand into his.

"Oh, do let's play nice parts," she remonstrated. "You know, if you once start in melodrama it's

Bonnie May

the hardest thing in the world to get into anything better."

He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. "I think I make rather a silly villain," he admitted.

"You see, I know what troubled you. I thought it out. You thought I could care more for the things the Thornburgs do for me than I do for the lovely way you took me in here and were good to me. Wasn't that it?"

"Why, something like that."

"Well, that's silly. Politeness—that's all it's been with them. But the way you took me in, and treated me, and everything. . . . You don't think I could be such a little beast as not to understand all that, do you?"

There was no other friction for many days. Indeed, Bonnie May was less frequently absent when Baron came into the house from his journeys about the city. She seemed after all to be developing only a limited interest in the Thornburgs.

Besides, Baron had a new interest thrust upon him. Baggot had arrived at a point in the development of his play which made him an incessant nuisance to all his acquaintances, and to Baron most of all. He could talk of nothing but his drama—"The Break of Day," it was called—and he insisted upon consulting Baron, or inviting his admiration and approval, half a dozen times a day.

Baggot's Play

Rehearsals had begun over at the Palace, and the process of cutting, and elaborating, and altering, was almost driving Baggot mad. Mad with resentment, sometimes; or mad with excitement and anticipations.

"You'll review it for one of the papers, won't you?" he demanded of Baron on one occasion, indicating by manner and tone that a refusal was out of the question.

"How can I tell?" retorted Baron. "I'll have to wait until I'm asked."

"I'll attend to that." He was blind to Baron's contemptuous and sceptical grin. "And I'll want to extend courtesies to your family, if you don't mind. A box. You know it helps a lot to have the right kind of people at a *première*." He perceived something in Baron's eyes which disquieted him. "I mean," he added, "I want to get the opinion of the right kind of people."

"Thank you," said Baron. "Of course I can't answer for the family. They might like to come. They will appreciate the invitation, in any event." He was wondering why he had ever permitted Baggot to get acquainted with him. Then, afraid that Baggot would read this thought in his eyes, he added evasively: "Bonnie May appears to be the real theatregoer of the family. She will want to come, I'm sure."

"Oh, Bonnie May!" Baggot seemed to be brushing the name aside. "It's the *family* I want.

Bonnie May

I have a reason. Be sure not to fail me." He seemed to remember something in connection with the work over at the Palace. In a moment he was gone, without a word of farewell.

He was utterly childish, Baron thought, and certainly it was wrong to disappoint children needlessly.

Yes, he would really try to persuade the family to go.

When occasion arose to speak to Bonnie May alone he tried to make light of the whole affair. "A great honor," he began, "for you and all of us. A box has been reserved for us for the first performance of 'The Break of Day.'"

Bonnie May clapped her hands. "How fine!" she said. "Do you think they will all go?"

"I hardly know. Really, it doesn't seem very important—does it?—a first performance, in a summer theatre, by an unknown company!"

She seemed anxious. "Anyway, I do hope mother will go."

Baron thought he understood that. If "mother" refused to go, she might not be permitted to go herself.

However, he approached his mother on the subject with a certain amount of earnestness. "I've had a sort of hand in the play, in a small way," he explained. "And Baggot is anxious to have us all come." He couldn't resist the temptation to add: "He places a high value on the opinion of

Baggot's Play

what he calls nice people. That means us. You can't seem indifferent to such recognition, can you?"

Mrs. Baron was deaf to the sarcasm. "Isn't it one of those cheap summer theatres?" she asked.

"Yes, but really I don't know that it will be very different from the winter performances. Not as an ethical proposition, anyway."

"I hardly think I'd be interested," she decided. However, she did not speak with her usual certainty, and she glanced at her son a bit anxiously. If he really wanted her to go. . . .

On a later occasion Baron again touched the subject. He had just got rid of Baggot, who was in an unusually enthusiastic mood.

"Really, mother, I have an idea that play is going to be quite worth while. If you didn't mind it very much. . . ."

But Mrs. Baron fancied she was being coerced. "No, I think not," she said, shaking her head.

"And Bonnie May," added Baron. "Great goodness, how anxious she is to go! I suppose she thinks she can't go unless you do."

Mrs. Baron's eyes flashed. That was it! Bonnie May's comfort and pleasure—that, and nothing more.

"I remember that argument," she said, rather disagreeably. "You forget that she has other friends now—rather better suited to her needs in this case. The Thornburgs can take her."

Bonnie May

But Baron, noting the uncomfortable look in her eyes, left her with the conclusion, unexpressed: "My bet is that the Thornburgs will *not* take her."

CHAPTER XXIII

BARON COMES HOME ON A BEER-DRAY

BARON was not at all confident that any of the dramatic editors would want him to write a review of "The Break of Day." He merely hoped his services might be required. And he was disappointed.

He might have had the assignment for the asking, perhaps; but he felt a hesitancy about asking. He had "fathered" the play, somewhat. He had a personal interest in it.

Moreover, there was one reason why he was glad to be disengaged. Now he could attend the performance as an ordinary spectator, and he could take Bonnie May with him.

The day of the first performance arrived. Baron left the mansion early in the forenoon, not for the purpose of escaping the half-insane Baggot than for any other reason. Baggot didn't really believe that Baron could help him, perhaps, but his nature demanded that he talk about his play all the time, and Baron listened well.

Bonnie May was not about when Baron left the mansion. He had had no final understanding with her as to whether she was to go to the theatre that night or not. And it was for this reason that he was

Bonnie May

coming home in a particularly eager mood, late in the afternoon, to tell her that he was foot-loose, and that she might depend upon him as an escort to the theatre.

He was coming home with much eagerness—and then an accident happened.

He started to alight from the cross-town car before it stopped, and his foot struck a loose fragment of stone, and he lost his balance. Thinking of the matter afterward, he decided that he could not recall an experience more banal, more needless. But he did not reach this conclusion at the time, for the good reason that his head struck the pavement and he lost consciousness. There had been just one instant of sharp agony.

He opened his eyes presently to find himself supported by two men. Every passenger in the crowded car, which had stopped, was staring at him. A crowd of pedestrians had also stopped to see what had happened.

He looked dazedly at the two men who were supporting him. One was the car-conductor, whose eyes expressed fear and disgust. The other man's appearance was in some degree familiar to Baron. He was gigantic, ruddy, wholly self-possessed.

Baron wondered who this man was, and then, as his gaze roved weakly from point to point, he saw a red beer-drayer—and he knew. This was the beer-driver whom he and Bonnie May had watched and discussed one day from the attic window.

Baron Comes Home on a Beer-Dray

"He's all right," declared the beer-driver, getting a firmer grip on Baron's arm.

Baron was greatly relieved to hear that he was "all right." He had his doubts. The back of his head seemed to be asleep, and there was a horrible pain in his left leg when he tried to touch the pavement with his foot.

"I'll want your name and address, and the names of witnesses," said the conductor. He had produced a little note-book.

"You don't need them," declared Baron. "It was my own fault. I don't want to be detained here."

"But the rules require—" said the conductor.

"Just forget the rules," advised the beer-driver, who perceived that Baron meant what he said. And in an instant Baron was feeling a new sort of embarrassment, because the ruddy giant of the beer-drays had picked him up in his arms, and was taking long strides in the direction of his dray. "Out of the way!" he ordered, and people obeyed.

Baron had the helpless sensation of one who rides on an elephant. He thought he realized now just what it must be to perform the tasks of a mahout. "Though I don't seem to need an ankus—yet," he meditated. Baron had read his Kipling.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," he said, speaking in a general downward direction.

"You're not troubling me," came back the answer.

Bonnie May

The driver had reached his dray, and greatly to Baron's amazement, he put a foot on the hub of the wheel, a disengaged hand on the iron bar surrounding the back of the seat, and had vaulted into a sitting posture, carrying his burden with him.

It seemed to Baron that he had been swung through limitless space, as if he had been a star, held to its place by gravity. He held his hat in place, as he might have done if a cyclone had seized him in its clutch. And with such attention as he could command he was observing the performance of the driver.

"Sit down," commanded that individual: needlessly, for already Baron was by his side, holding on to the iron bar at the back of the seat, and feeling uncomfortably light and dizzy. His companion looked into his eyes. "A pretty hard jolt," he said, thrusting a protecting arm about his charge. "Gee-app." He pulled the reins dexterously with the aid of thumb and little finger, and the horses began to move.

Much to Baron's surprise, the driver did not ask him where he lived, but quietly turned his horses' heads in the right direction, adjusting the brake with his foot, and glancing ahead to see that the right of way was clear.

Baron's mind reverted to Bonnie May for an instant, and he remembered that she had noted how the driver had held his reins with authority, and sat with his great legs planted purposefully before him. Yes, that was precisely right.

Baron Comes Home on a Beer-Dray

"You haven't asked me where I live," he remarked, trying to be partly independent of his companion's support.

"I don't have to. I know."

"How?"

"I've noticed you before now. You're one of the Barons."

The injured man felt flattered. Still, he reflected, the driver might have noticed him for any number of unflattering reasons. For a moment he tried to fathom this thought: Was it an evidence that the driver was simple and stupid, that he had interested himself in the people who lived in his neighborhood? He couldn't reach a satisfactory conclusion.

"It's awfully good of you to give me a lift like this," he remarked. He was beginning to feel a little less shaken and strange.

"Oh, I don't know. You'd do as much for me, wouldn't you?"

"Carry you around and lift you up on a high seat?" asked Baron incredulously.

The driver threw back his immense head, revealing a bronzed, bull-like throat from which a sound like thunder came. "Well, no, I guess you wouldn't do *that*," he admitted.

The horses, with their ears turned alternately toward the driver and pointed ahead, were brought to a halt in front of the mansion.

"Now you sit up here and hold tight, and try to look as if nothing had happened," directed the

Bonnie May

driver. He removed his arm and sprang to the pavement.

"Why?" Baron wanted to know.

"I want to call your old lady out, so she can see you sitting up on the seat."

Baron frowned. "Why?" he asked again.

"If I'd carry you to the door and ring the bell, she'd have a fit when she came out. She's pretty high-strung, anyway." It was as if he were describing a woman of his own household, instead of Baron's.

"Oh!" responded Baron. He was thinking that it was difficult to know where to expect chivalry in one form or another, and that there were various ways of manifesting it. "I believe you're right," he added.

It was Mrs. Baron who came to the door in response to a ring. It is not improbable that she had been looking out of the upper window.

"Your son wants to speak to you," said the driver, dragging off his German cap and revealing a shock of dishevelled hair.

Mrs. Baron seemed to ignore the man utterly. She stood, pale and rigid, staring at Baron. She comprehended at least one thing: he had driven up to the door of the mansion in a beer-dray.

Then she smiled ominously. "What a quaint idea!" said she, passing the driver and descending the steps. "Of course, this is one of your jokes!"

Baron Comes Home on a Beer-Dray

She paused then. She had swiftly become less assured in her anger.

"I've had a mean fall, mother," said Baron, trying to keep a martyr-like tone out of his voice. "I'm afraid I'll have to be carried into the house. This man was good enough to bring me home. He was afraid of alarming you. It was his idea that you ought to be notified before he carried me in."

"Oh, I didn't understand!" There was swift, childlike remorse in her bearing. "It was kind of you," she added to the driver, by way of atonement for her rudeness. She regarded him with flickering eyes. She could not help shrinking from the warm, gross bulk of the man, yet she admired him somewhat as a lamb might admire a benevolent bull that has just driven a wolf away.

She went as far as the curb and looked up at Baron critically. Yes, he was seriously injured. Something told her that. A strained expression about his lips and eyes, perhaps, and his attitude.

She turned anxiously to the driver. "Do you suppose you can get him in without any help?" she asked.

"Sure!" The driver derived no joy from her sudden discomfiture—in the sudden levelling of her high spirit to the lowly plane of a fearful mother. Perhaps he did not realize that she had been wrathful toward her son, and rude to him. "You go and push the door open and get things ready." He approached Baron and held his arms up.

Bonnie May

Baron put his hands on the immense fellow's shoulders, and again he experienced that sensation of being swung through space. In an instant he was being borne up his own front steps.

"Can you carry him up-stairs?" inquired Mrs. Baron dubiously.

"Why not?" And up the stairs the driver proceeded, without the slightest evident effort.

At the top Mrs. Baron led the way into Baron's old room—now Bonnie May's. But the driver paused on the threshold, leisurely casting his eyes over the evidences of feminine proprietorship.

"You'd better let me take him to his own room, mother," he declared decisively. He seemed quite unconscious of bearing a burden. He was woodenly indifferent to Baron's efforts to get down.

"But that's up another flight," was Mrs. Baron's faltering response.

"That's all right. You see, I'm used to delivering beer-barrels, and they always find they save trouble if they let me put 'em just where they belong."

Baron, thinking of the difficulties which might arise when this willing and capable Atlas was gone, quite agreed with the suggestion. "I'm sure he's right, mother," he said, "if he doesn't mind."

Up another flight Baron was borne, and at the top the driver turned about haltingly, but still seemingly unaware of having his strength taxed, and called down: "You better see about getting a

Baron Comes Home on a Beer-Dray

doctor, mother. He'll need to have himself looked after. I can put him to bed."

Baron was able to grin weakly at the driver's simple generalship—and at the fact that his mother obeyed with nervous promptitude. "That way," said he, pointing, and then he essayed a little joke. "I think you forgot to carry me around the block a time or two before you started up here, didn't you?" he asked the driver.

"Oh, it's nothing," came back the response. "If I had a twelve-year-old boy who didn't weigh more than you do, I'd drown him."

With this the attic room was entered, and Baron was placed carefully on a chair. Then his shoes and other garments were removed with caution, and before he quite realized what had happened, he was in bed.

"I wish I had your strength," he said, feeling that such service as he had received ought to be acknowledged somehow.

"What? Oh, you'd better leave that to me. I need it and you don't. I guess that's about the only thing I've got."

"No, it isn't. You've got the right kind of a heart, too."

This created instant embarrassment. By way of escape from praise, the big fellow whispered loudly: "Say the word and I'll jump out and get a bucket of beer before the mother gets back."

"Beer!" exclaimed Baron. He had always as-

Bonnie May

sociated beer with festive occasions, and he was quite sure the present moment was not a festive occasion. "I don't believe I care for any beer—just now." He believed he had achieved a commendably diplomatic stroke by adding the two last words. He was prompted to add: "But if you're sure your horses won't get restless, I'd be glad to have you stay until mother comes."

The driver sat down, selecting a straight-backed chair, and holding himself so upright that he made Baron think of a huge, benevolent heathen god. He had dropped his cap to the floor beside him, and his hands were clasped about his capacious stomach. There was now a restful placidity as well as extraordinary power in his presence.

"And it isn't just your strength that I envy," said Baron, catching the luminous blue eyes of the driver for an instant, "it's the generous way you've got of treating a fellow as if he were a brother!"

This, too, created great embarrassment. The driver's face flamed and he struggled to get away from anything resembling praise. "Yes, sir!" he exclaimed, as if he were merely continuing, "that bay horse would stand in his tracks until I came back, even if the owner of the brewery tried to drive him away."

Baron laughed. "Well, I won't say anything more to your credit, if you don't want to hear it," he said. But after a moment's silence he went on, more seriously than he had yet spoken, "but do

Baron Comes Home on a Beer-Dray

tell me, for my own good, how you manage to feel so well disposed toward people—toward everybody!”

“Who, me? Oh, I just drink a bucket of beer every time I get thirsty, and every time I begin to feel mean I go out and dance with the girls pretty near all night. The bigger they are the easier I swing 'em.” He leaned back and laughed until things in the room shook. A book fell off the table.

Mrs. Baron came in with the doctor then, and it remained for her to make the mistake which Baron had avoided.

“You must let me pay you for your trouble,” she said. “I don't know what would have happened but for you.”

But the extraordinary creature grasped his cap in both hands and reddened again. “Who, me?” he said. “Oh, no, mother. I make mine flirting with beer-barrels.” He made his exit uneasily. They heard him whistling on the stairs. In the distance the front door closed with a bang.

“What an extraordinary creature!” exclaimed Mrs. Baron.

“Yes,” replied Baron, “I'm afraid he is—extraordinary.”

He was remembering something about . . . misleading effects of a make-up. Surely this big fellow's immense body and his rough speech were only a make-up, after all, hiding those qualities which even from the standpoint of a Baron were

Bonnie May

most to be sought and cherished! That was what Bonnie May had tried to impress upon him.

Then, with sudden anxiety, Baron turned to his mother. "Where is Bonnie May?" he asked.

"She went away this afternoon," was the response. Mrs. Baron avoided her son's eyes. She spoke rather guiltily.

"She went away," Baron mused disconsolately. "And it was to-night she was so eager to have somebody take her to see 'The Break of Day.'"

CHAPTER XXIV

BONNIE MAY HIDES SOMETHING

BARON made a wry face when he was told by Doctor Percivald that he had a very badly sprained ankle, and that he would have to remain on his back indefinitely.

"Couldn't it have been something less—lady-like?" he wanted to know. But Doctor Percivald, being a scientific-minded person, merely glanced at him impatiently and said nothing.

However, he speedily discovered that being an invalid on what might be considered a preferred plan was not without its compensations.

He became the pivot around which the affairs of the household revolved. He was constantly being considered and deferred to. It had been so long since any member of the family had been disabled that his affliction, being very limited in extent, was looked upon as a sort of luxury.

However, though the family gathered about his bed occasionally to hold pleasant discussions, there were times when he lay alone—and these were the most profitable if not the most pleasant hours of all.

The noises of the street, pleasantly muffled, reached him; movements in the house were faintly

Bonnie May

audible and pleasantly homely; the sun shone with a lonely brilliance against his walls.

During such periods he took an inventory of life from a new angle. He sat in judgment upon himself like a disinterested person. Baron, disabled, critically surveyed Baron, able to be about.

"Spendthrift of time and chance—that's what you are," decided Baron, disabled, directing his condemnation against Baron, well and sound. "You've been thinking all the time that to be Baron was something fine. You haven't had sense enough to realize that merely being Baron wasn't being anything at all. You've got to realize that all men must be measured by just one standard. You've got to quit thinking it's right for you to do just the pleasant things—the things you like to do. You have got to go to work, and take orders like any other man."

Lying in his room, he obtained a new impression of Bonnie May, too.

She did not return to the mansion on the day of his accident. He thought she might possibly do so after the theatre hour, but the evening passed and in due time there were the sounds of the house being closed for the night, and languid voices calling to one another on the floor below.

The first long night passed, with occasional tapping on the invalid's door by Mrs. Baron. A dozen times during the night she came to see if he needed anything, to be sure that he rested comfortably.

Bonnie May Hides Something

Finally he chided her gayly for disturbing him and herself; then, after another interval which seemed only of a few minutes, he opened his eyes again to respond to the tapping on the door, and discovered that the sun was shining into the room. It was quite late in the forenoon.

"I've come with the papers," said Flora, approaching his bed like a particularly lovely ministering angel. "Mother's lying down. She didn't sleep very well last night."

Baron had the odd thought that people must look entirely different if you looked at them while you were lying down. Never before had Flora seemed so serene and beautiful and richly endowed with graces of person and voice. He was so pleased with this view of her that he decided not to lift his head.

Then, while she arranged the papers, unconscious of his scrutiny, he read an expression in her eyes which brought him abruptly to his elbow.

"Flora," he declared, "you're not happy!"

She laughed softly as if to ridicule such a suggestion, but immediately there was a delicate flush in her face. "Nonsense!" she said. "And somebody helpless in the house to worry about? One wouldn't dance and sing under the circumstances. I'm trying to behave becomingly—that's all."

Baron disregarded this. "And as soon as I get up," he said, "I'm going to see that certain nonsense is ended. He's a dandy good fellow—that's

Bonnie May

what he is. I can't imagine what we've all been thinking about."

"He—" Flora began properly enough, but the conventional falsehood she meant to utter failed to shape itself. She couldn't return her brother's glance. It occurred to her that the window-shade needed adjusting.

"I'm going to put a stop to certain nonsense," Baron repeated. He rattled the newspapers with decision, covertly regarding his sister, who did not trust herself to speak again. She kept her eyes averted as she left the room.

Flora had opened all the papers so that the dramatic reviews came uppermost, and as Baron glanced from one to another he forgot Flora completely. By the time he had glanced at the fifth review of the production of "The Break of Day" he dropped the papers and drew a long breath. "Holy Smoke!" he exclaimed, and then he returned to his reading.

Baggot's play had scored an almost unprecedented success. Several of the dramatic critics had written signed articles in which they expressed unbounded praise. And from his knowledge of newspaper writing, Baron knew that even the most hardened of theatregoers had been swept off their feet by the charm and novelty of the new play.

Baron gathered that a new actress had been added to the group of notable American artists as a result of the creation of the part of "The

Bonnie May Hides Something

Sprite." But when he sought from one account to another for the name of this player, he found only that the rôle of "The Sprite" had been played "By Herself." He couldn't find her name anywhere, or anything about her.

But after all, the identity of even a very successful player was not the thing Baron was thinking of most. He was delighted that Baggot had been successful. It seemed that Baggot had "arrived."

His reflections were interrupted by his mother. She entered the room rather hurriedly. Baron realized that something must have happened, or she wouldn't have come in like that, rubbing her eyes sleepily and wearing a loose wrapper.

"They're telephoning for you down at the newspaper office," she yawned. "I didn't tell them you were—that you couldn't. . . . I thought maybe you might like to do some writing in bed, if they want you to."

"No, I'm not going to do any writing in bed. I feel as if that is what I've been doing always. I'm going to wait until I can get up, and then I'm going to work in earnest."

She regarded him dubiously, not understanding at all. "And what shall I say?" she asked.

"Tell them I'm laid up, and that I'll be down to see them as soon as I'm able to be about."

"Very well."

"And mother—don't say I've got a sprained ankle. Think of something else."

Bonnie May

"Something else——" Mrs. Baron succeeded now in opening her eyes to their normal width.

"It doesn't sound very impressive. Everybody sprains his ankle. You might say I've broken my leg, if you can't think of anything else."

"A sprained ankle is a sprained ankle," was the answer he received; and he dropped back on his pillow as limply as if he had been overcome by a great flash of truth.

Almost immediately, however, he heard a distant commotion on the stairway and, after an instant of whispering and murmuring in the hall, his door flew open. To his astonishment, Bonnie May literally ran into the room.

Her face was colorless; she was staring at him.

"What happened?" she asked in a voice which was unsteady.

"Nothing, child!" he exclaimed sharply. "They've alarmed you. It was nothing at all. Didn't mother tell you?"

"She told me there had been an accident and that you were in bed. I didn't wait for any more."

"But you can see it's nothing. I can't understand your being so excited."

She went closer to him, and he could see that her body was quivering. "Is it something that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't gone away?" she asked.

"It's nothing at all—and it would have happened in any case. I've only sprained my ankle. I'm ashamed to mention such a little thing. And

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for goodness' sake, don't look as if I'd had my head cut off and you were to blame."

She sat down a distance from his bed, a strangely unhappy little creature. Her sharp uncasiness gave place to a dull, increasing apathy. She was not looking at Baron now.

He couldn't stand that. "Did you see the play last night?" he asked pleasantly.

She stared at him. "Did I see it? Certainly not. How could I?"

She was studying his eyes, and swiftly the misery in her own was multiplied many times.

He almost lost patience with her. "Well, good gracious! Don't take it so much to heart. There will be other chances. It made good, you know. It will have a run sometime. We'll see it, you and I together."

"Yes," she said, and sighed. A settled look of misery returned to her eyes.

She did not leave the mansion for many days. Her sprightly moods returned to her occasionally; yet it was not to be ignored that in some strange fashion she was changed.

She spent much of her time in Baron's room. She became almost irritatingly eager to serve him. She seemed to be wishing to atone for something—to re-establish herself in her own confidence and respect. That was how it seemed to Baron, after he had observed her studiously a score of times.

Bonnie May

Occasionally he drove her from his room, achieving this by gay upbraidings. He insisted upon having the daily lessons attended to, and it was with the liveliest interest that he listened to the little tinkling melodies she played, slowly and with many an error. He realized that a great deal of progress was being made. His mother was patient, and Bonnie May was a painstaking pupil.

Baggot came in in the course of a day or two. He was cultivating a new sort of manner, in which there was much condescension. His tone seemed to say: "You see, I succeeded, even if you *did* fail me."

"I'm sure the play is going to be a winner," said Baron.

"Oh, yes—it will go all right. I'm overhauling it a bit. We only gave it that first performance so I could see just how to finish it, and to get our copyright, and that sort of thing. It will go on regularly, you know, this fall."

Baggot had received his promotion, Baron reflected. He would go forward now into a more active life. He would probably be seen at the mansion a time or two again, and that would be the end of him, so far as the Barons were concerned.

Another visitor during those days was the beer-driver, who came to inquire about Baron's condition, and for further manifestations of kindness, as it appeared.

Bonnie May Hides Something

Baron tried to shake his hand, but the task was too herculean.

"I might go out the back way and slip in a can, if the old lady's against it," he said, flushing readily and smiling.

"It just happens that I don't care for it," said Baron. "I'm quite as much obliged to you."

He thought it was rather a hopeful sign that he was genuinely pleased to see this man, who had tried to be a good neighbor.

"August is my name," said the visitor as he prepared to go. "When you're near the brewery, ask for me. You could go to a dance with me some night. We got a lot of fine fellows. Girls, too." He said this in the tone of one who would say: "You're plenty good enough to go with me."

Then he, too, was gone.

The days passed—more days than Baron liked to count. And still Bonnie May did not go over to the Thornburgs', but haunted Baron's room early and late, between lesson hours, and tried in a thousand ways to serve him.

He made curious discoveries touching her.

Often she stood by the window looking out, and he marvelled to see her body become possessed by some strange spirit within her. Her very flesh seemed to be thinking, to be trying to become articulate. And when she looked at him, after such a period as this, she suddenly shrank within her-

Bonnie May

self and gazed at him with a wistfulness so intense that he felt an eager wish to help her—yet also a strange helplessness.

Once he cried: "You strange little creature, what is it?"

But she only shook her head slowly and whispered, "Nothing"—though he saw that her eyes filled with tears.

Finally Doctor Percivald called again—three weeks had passed since the patient had been put to bed—and announced that if Baron would confine his activities to the house for a few days longer, he might safely get up.

CHAPTER XXV

BONNIE MAY SEES TWO FACES AT A WINDOW

It was at luncheon, and Baron was down-stairs for the first time since his accident.

"It's just like having Johnny come back from the war," observed Bonnie May, as the family took their places at table. Baron, Sr., was not there. He usually spent his midday hour at his club.

"From the war?—Johnny?" replied Baron. He stood by his chair an instant, putting most of his weight on one foot.

"I mean, you can think of so many delicious things. We might believe you were wounded, you know, coming home to see your wife and daughter. As if the sentries had allowed you to come in for a little while. They would be outside now, watching. Men with dirty faces and heavy boots."

"Yes, if I had a wife and daughter," suggested Baron.

"Oh, well—Flora and I. Anyway, you've got a mother, and that's the real thing when there's any soldier business."

"It's a real thing, anyway," observed Mrs. Baron.

"Yes, of course," admitted the child. She sighed deeply. How was any one to get anywhere, with

Bonnie May

so many literal-minded people about? She remembered the man in the play who said, "If we are discovered, we are lost," and the other who replied, "No, if we are discovered, we are found."

It was Mrs. Baron who returned to prosaic affairs.

"I'm going out this afternoon," she said briskly. "I've been tied up here in the house three Thursdays. There are people I simply must call on."

Bonnie May did not know why her heart should have jumped at this announcement. Still, there seemed to be no end to the possibilities for enjoyment in a big house when there wasn't anybody to be saying continuously: "You must," or "You mustn't."

She wandered up-stairs as soon as luncheon was over, and in Baron's room she was overcome by an irresistible impulse.

She heard the houseman moving about in the next room, and the thought occurred to her that she had never seen the houseman's room. She had never even spoken to the houseman. There was something quite mysterious about the fact that he always kept to himself.

Mrs. Shepard had assured her on one occasion that Thomason never had a word to say to anybody—that he was a perverse and sullen creature.

Now it occurred to her that possibly Mrs. Shepard's estimate might lack fairness. Anyway, it would be interesting to find out for herself. It would be a kind of adventure.

Bonnie May Sees Two Faces

She tapped lightly on Thomason's door.

After an interval of silence, during which one might have thought that the room itself was amazed, there was the sound of heavy feet approaching.

The door opened and Thomason stood on the threshold. Bonnie May had never been near enough to him really to see him before. Now she discovered that he had quaint creases about his mouth and eyes, and that his eyes were like violets. It was as if you had dropped some violets accidentally, and they had fallen in a strange place. There was a childish expression in Thomason's eyes, and it occurred to Bonnie May that possibly he was afraid of people.

It seemed to her quite shocking that the man should remain by himself always, because he was afraid of mingling with people.

Thomason's eyes were very bright as he looked at her. Then he winked slowly, to facilitate thought. He was thinking: "She's the one who does whatever she pleases." Despite his habits of seclusion, Thomason was by no means oblivious to the life that went on in the mansion.

"May I come in?" asked Bonnie May. She did not worry about the absence of a spontaneous welcome. "It's an adventure," she was thinking.

Thomason laboriously turned about, with a slight list to leeward, and ambled to the middle of the room, where he sat down on a bench. He took up a pair of steel-rimmed glasses from which one

Bonnie May

temple had been broken and replaced by a piece of twine. He slipped the twine over his head and adjusted the glasses on his nose. It seemed necessary for him to sit quite still to keep this contrivance in place. When he reached around to his bed for a coat, which he had evidently been mending, he held his head and body as rigid as possible.

Bonnie May advanced into the room, her hands clasped before her, her eyes quite freely surveying her surroundings.

"What a quaint setting!" she observed.

Thomason jerked his needle through a tough place and pulled it out to arm's length, holding his head with painful sedateness, on account of the glasses. He seemed afraid to glance to left or right. He made no reply at all.

"I've been learning to use a needle, too," she confided, thinking that he did not do it very skillfully.

Thomason held his head as far back as possible and closed one eye. He was thus handicapping himself, it appeared, in order to get a better view of the work he held on his knee.

"Would you like me to hold it, while you go across the room to look?" she asked.

Thomason suddenly became quite rigid. It was as if his works had run down. He was thinking about what Bonnie May had said.

Then, "Women!" he muttered, and the works seemed to have been wound up again.

Bonnie May Sees Two Faces

This seemed a somewhat indefinite and meagre return for so much cheerful effort, and Bonnie May decided not to try any more just then. She went to the gable window and looked out. She was almost on a level with the fourth story of the building next door, which had been remodelled for use as a boarding-house. And looking up into the window nearest her, she suddenly became animated in the most extraordinary manner.

A man was looking down at her, and in his eyes there was a puzzled expression to match the puzzled expression in her own.

She turned, with subdued excitement, to Thomason, sitting on his bench near the middle of the room, with his bed and an old trunk for a shabby background. If he would only go away!

She looked up at the man in the window opposite and smiled. In a guarded tone she remarked: "It's a very nice day!" and instantly she turned toward Thomason again, so that he might believe she was addressing him in the event of his looking up from his work.

But Thomason, believing this needless remark had been addressed to him, had borne enough. He arose laboriously, grasping his coat in one hand and his spectacles in the other, and left the room. At the door there was a muttered "Women!"—and then a bang.

Bonnie May clasped her hands in delight, relief and drew closer to the window. "It's Clifton!"

Bonnie May

she exclaimed to the man in the window opposite.

"It's Bonnie May!" came back the eager response.

"Oh!" she moaned. She smiled up at the man across the open space helplessly. Then she took her left hand into her right hand, and shook it affectionately.

"You dear thing!" came back the word from Clifton. "Where have you been?"

"Oh, why can't I get at you?" was Bonnie May's rejoinder, and she looked down at the ground and shuddered at the abysmal depths.

The man she had called Clifton disappeared for a moment, and when he stood at the window again there was some one close beside him, looking out over his shoulder.

"And Jack, too!" she breathed eagerly, yet fearfully. It occurred to her that some one must hear her, and drag her back into the tedious realm of conventionality again. For the moment she was almost inclined to regard herself as a kidnapped person, held apart from friends and rescuers.

"If it isn't the kid!" was the comment of the second man, and his eyes beamed happily.

"You both rooming over there?" asked Bonnie May.

"Since yesterday. We've got an engagement at the Folly."

Bonnie May Sees Two Faces

"And to think of your being within—oh, I can't talk to you this way! I must get to you!"

"You and Miss Barry stopping there?"

"Why, you see, I'm not working just now. Miss Barry——"

She stopped suddenly, her eyes filling with terror. She had heard a step behind her.

Turning, she beheld Baron in the doorway.

"I thought I heard you talking," he said, in quite a casual tone. "Was Thomason here?"

"I was talking—to Thomason. My back was turned. He seems to have gone out." She looked about the room, even under the bed. She didn't want Baron to see her eyes for a moment. "Such a quaint old gentleman—isn't he?" she commented. She had moved away from the window. She had almost regained her composure now.

Baron's brows contracted. He glanced toward the window at which she had been standing. In the depths of the room beyond he thought he could detect a movement. He was not sure.

"Do you and Thomason talk to each other—quite a little?" he asked. He tried to make his tone lightly inconsequential.

"That wouldn't express it, so far as he is concerned. He won't talk to me at all. I have to do all the talking."

"And do you—feel quite confidential toward him?"

"Why, I think you might feel safe in talking to him. He doesn't seem the sort that carries tales."

Bonnie May

Baron went to the window and looked out. He could see nobody. But when he confronted her again his expression was harsh, there was an angry light in his eyes.

"Bonnie May, you were talking to some one in the other house. You were mentioning Miss Barry. You weren't talking to Thomason at all."

She became perfectly still. She was now looking at him steadily. "I was talking to Thomason until he went out," she said. "Then, as you say, I was 'talking to some one in the other house.' Why? Why not?"

The docility of the home life, the eagerness to be pliant and sweet, fell from her wholly. An old influence had been brought to bear upon her, and she was now Bonnie May the actress again. For the moment benefits and obligations were forgot, and the old freedom was remembered.

"We don't know the people in that house," retorted Baron.

"That isn't my fault. I happen to know two of them. If you like I'll introduce you. Very clever people." Her tone was almost flippant.

Baron was astounded. "You've found friends!" he said. He couldn't help speaking with a slight sneer.

"You don't do it very well," she said. "I could show you how, if you cared to learn—though it's rather out of date."

"Bonnie May!" he cried reproachfully.

Bonnie May Sees Two Faces

"You made me do it!" she said, suddenly forlorn and regretful. "I didn't do anything. That's a rooming-house over there, and I happened to see two old friends of mine at the window. They were glad to see me, and I was glad to see them. That's all." Her expression darkened with discouragement. She added: "And I wasn't quite untruthful. I *had* been talking to Thomason."

Baron meditatively plucked his lower lip between his finger and thumb. "I was wrong," he said. "I admit, I was in the wrong." He tried to relieve the situation by being facetious. "You know I've been an invalid," he reminded her. "And people are always patient with invalids."

"It's all right," she said. And he had the disquieting realization that she had grown quite apart from him, for the moment at least, and that it didn't matter to her very much now whether he was disagreeable or not.

She sighed and walked absent-mindedly from the room. She remembered to turn in the doorway and smile at him amiably. But he felt that the action was polite, rather than spontaneous.

And he reflected, after she had gone away, that she hadn't volunteered to say a word about the people she had talked to through the window.

CHAPTER XXVI

A GATHERING IN THE ATTIC

WHEN Bonnie May went down-stairs and learned that Mrs. Baron had gone out calling, she entered her own room and pushed her door partly shut, so that she would be invisible to any one passing.

Her most earnest wish, for the moment, was to see her two friends next door. Of course, she would see them before long, but she did not like to leave the matter to chance.

There was no reason why she should not simply go to their front door, and knock and ask for them. No reason; but undoubtedly a prejudice. The Barons wouldn't approve of such a thing. She really hadn't been aware of the existence of the house next door until now. She realized that there were worlds between the people who lived over there and the people who lived in the mansion. So far as she was concerned, the Barons were a Family, while Heaven only knew what those other people were.

Well, she would think of some way of getting at Clifton and Jack some other time. Something would happen. And in the meantime, Mrs. Baron was gone and there were various things which

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might be done now which couldn't be done at any other time.

Rummaging among her possessions in search of an inspiration she came upon a hat covered with little silk butterflies.

She had the liveliest appreciation of the silk butterflies, though she did not quite approve of the shape of the hat upon which they were bestowed. On the other hand, there was a hat of adorable shape which had an insufficient decoration in the form of a spray of roses which were not of the right color, and which were in too advanced a stage of development.

In another moment a small pair of scissors was travelling over one of the hats with a snipping sound and a startlingly destructive effect.

The snipping was not suspended until voices, subdued and confidential, arose in the near-by sitting-room.

Baron had come down-stairs, too, and was talking to Flora.

"The thing for us to do," Baron was saying, "is to go places, and let him know about it beforehand. Any place at all. For a walk in the park, or to the theatre. I wouldn't be in the way. I would know what to do. And after—that is to say, when. . . . What I mean is that in the course of time you could just tell mother that you've made up your mind, and that it's your business, and not hers. The thing is absurd. She's got no reasons. We've no

Bonnie May

right to let her have her own way entirely in such a case."

Bonnie May dropped the hat into her lap, and paid no attention to the shower of butterflies and roses which fell to the carpet. Quite stealthily she went out into the hall. A moment of indecision—and then she descended the stairs to the first floor.

"There's *that* to be attended to, too," she was reflecting.

She went to the telephone immediately. She had noiselessly closed the dining-room door, so she wouldn't be heard. And after very little delay she had Mr. Addis on the other end of the wire.

"It's Bonnie May," she said in response to Addis's greeting. "I called you up to tell you that you're wanted here this afternoon. It's really important. I think, honestly, you ought to come. Can you?"

"Why, yes, certainly!" came back the vigorous and pleasant voice of Addis. "Yes, I'll come right away."

In the hall she paused, thrilled by the contemplation of a good, forbidden deed. Then the warm sunlight, finding its way in through the ground-glass door, enticed her, and she went out into the vestibule. There she stood looking out on the street.

Clearly, fate was on her side.

Almost immediately two immaculately dressed

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gentlemen, moving with superb elegance, passed the gate.

Bonnie May ran down the steps, calling to them. "Clifton!" was the word that penetrated the chaos of street noises, and "Oh, Jack!"

The two gentlemen turned about, and at the sight of the child they became far less correct in their general deportment. Happiness made them quite unconscious of self.

Very shortly afterward a little girl was sitting between two altogether presentable gentlemen on the top step in front of the Baron mansion.

"Of course we shouldn't," admitted Bonnie May. "We never sit on the front steps. I mean, the Family. But nobody will know. And, besides, I don't see how we can help ourselves."

"We don't mind at all," Clifton assured her. He looked inquiringly over his shoulder, into the vestibule. "What is it?—an old ladies' home?"

"Not exactly. It's one old lady's home, and you couldn't get in without a jimmy or a letter of introduction. She used to be a Boone."

"Of course that explains it," said Clifton. "What are you doing here? Does she give private theatricals?"

"Not intentionally. No, I'm the little daughter of the house—a kind of Little Eva, without any dogs or fiddles, and I have to go to bed at nine o'clock, and take lessons. It's really a wonderful place. When we all sit down to the table it—it

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sticks. When I get across with anything neat nobody whistles. Far from it."

Clifton and Jack accepted all this as quite definitely informative.

"Domesticated," explained Clifton to Jack, who nodded.

"How did you find them?" Jack wanted to know.

"They found me. There's a Romeo in the house who's the real thing. Love me, love my Romeo. That's how I feel about him. He brought me here."

"But where——"

"You see, Miss Barry wished me onto one of the theatres here last spring when the going got rough. Put me down and disappeared. And he found me. I wish to goodness you and he could get acquainted. *You* know that I was a baby only a few years back. But just because I don't cry for bread and milk here they seem to think I'm Mrs. Tom Thumb come back to earth. You could tell them."

Clifton and Jack leaned back as far as they safely could and laughed heartily. Then they drew painfully sedate faces and sprang to their feet. A soft yet decisive voice—the voice of a young woman—sounded behind them.

When Bonnie May turned around she realized that she and her two friends were standing in a line on the bottom step, looking up into the faces of Baron and Flora, who had made their appearance in the vestibule.

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Flora was smiling in a pleasantly mischievous manner. Baron was regarding the two actors critically, yet not with unfriendliness.

"Won't you introduce your friends?" asked Flora.

Bonnie May did so. She concluded with, "old friends of mine in the profession."

"If I might suggest," said Flora, "it's ever so much more comfortable in the house, if you don't mind coming in." She turned to Baron with slightly heightened color. Her glance seemed to say: "You can see they are gentlemen." Something of constraint passed from her eyes when Baron pushed the door open and turned to the two men, who were "in the profession," and led the way into the house.

"Delighted," said Clifton, mounting the steps, followed by the other actor.

"You're very welcome on your own account," said Baron, "and, besides, we all like to do anything we can to please Mrs. Tom Thumb."

He glanced sharply at Bonnie May, who nodded in her best manner and remarked, with delicacy of intonation: "Caught with the goods!"

The little joke paved the way for really comfortable intercourse, and there was a highly satisfactory condition of sociability in the sitting-room up-stairs half an hour later when the street bell rang.

It rang as if it were in the nature of a challenge. And the ring was almost immediately repeated.

Bonnie May

"Mrs. Shepard must be out," said Flora. She went to respond.

It was only the McKelvey girls, after all. Bonnie May heard their gay voices in the lower hall. And it occurred to her that there was danger of certain complications—complications which might not be wholly agreeable.

She turned to Baron. "You know we've a hundred things to talk about—old times and old friends. Couldn't we go up into your room until the company goes?" She referred to herself and the actors, of course.

In his heart Baron could have blessed her for the thought. The McKelvey girls were on their way up-stairs, and he was not sure about the propriety of bringing the McKelvey girls into even a fleeting relationship with two actors whom none of them knew.

"Why, if you like," he said, with an air of reluctance—which he fully overcame by the promptness with which he arose and got the child and her friends started on their way.

Flora might have decided to entertain her callers in the room down-stairs, if she had had any choice in the matter. But the McKelvey girls had always felt wholly at home in the mansion, and they had begun climbing the stairs before Flora closed the street door.

Flora paused for an instant, changing from one arm to the other the huge bundle of flowers the

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elder Miss McKelvey had thrust at her upon entering. A wan, resigned smile trembled on her lips, and then she tossed her head ever so slightly.

"Oh, what's the difference!" she exclaimed to herself, and then she followed the others up the broad flight of stairs.

Still, she was somewhat relieved to find no one but her brother in the room into which the visitors led the way. She did not know just what had happened, but she did not ask any questions. And then she heard the murmur of voices up in the attic, and understood.

She brought a vase and put the flowers into it. "Don't they look beautiful?" she asked. She had to lift her voice a little, because both of the McKelvey girls were talking at once.

"They certainly do!" came the response in a wholly unexpected voice, and Flora turned and beheld the animated face of Mrs. Harrod, framed in the doorway.

"Mrs. Shepard asked me to come on up," said Mrs. Harrod. She looked about her as if the room were empty. "Flora," she demanded, "where's that child?" She had laid eager hands upon Flora's shoulders and kissed her flushed cheek with genuine affection. She had also taken a second to glance at the McKelvey girls and say: "How-do, young ladies?"

"Child?" echoed Miss Baron.

"That perfect little creature who was here the

Bonnie May

last time I was. I did hope she'd let me in again. Such angelic manners! You don't mean to say you've let her go?"

"Oh, Bonnie May! No, she hasn't gone. She's quite one of us now. Where is she, Victor?"

Baron fidgeted. "She went up into the attic, I believe."

Mrs. Harrod made for the hall immediately. "I'm sure you don't mind," she said, without turning around. They heard her climbing the second flight of stairs. "You young people won't miss me," she called back.

The younger Miss McKelvey suddenly sat up very straight. "What's the matter with you, Flora Baron?" she demanded.

"The matter?"

"The way you're looking at Victor—yes, and the way he's looking at you. What's the mystery?"

Flora listened. Up-stairs a door opened and shut, and then there was silence. "I was wondering if Mrs. Harrod would find things just to her liking up there," she explained.

"Oh! Well, if she doesn't, it will be her own fault. People who take possession of a house can't be too particular."

"I suppose not," admitted Flora thoughtfully. She was listening intently again. There was a movement down-stairs. Mrs. Shepard was serenely complaining to herself on the ground of many interruptions. The street door opened and shut and

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Flora heard resonant, familiar tones. Baron heard them, too.

"I'll see," Mrs. Shepard was heard to say, and then there was the sound of her heavy tread on the stairs.

Again Flora and Victor looked at each other dubiously.

"What is the matter with you?" demanded Miss McKelvey—the other Miss McKelvey, this time.

Flora leaned back against the mantel almost limply and laughed—not the laugh of Bonnie May's lessons, but the old contralto gurgle. "Nothing," she said. Her cheeks flamed, her eyes were filled with a soft light.

"Mr. Addis has called to see Miss Baron," announced Mrs. Shepard truculently in the doorway.

"I'll go right down," said Flora.

"Oh!" exclaimed the elder Miss McKelvey.

"Oh!" echoed her sister.

They arose as by a common impulse and stole out into the hall. "We don't care if we do," they flung back in a whisper as they tiptoed to the stair railing. They came hurrying back with ecstatic twitterings. "You know you never entertain company in that dark room down-stairs, Flora Baron! You've got to bring him up!"

Flora gazed at them in rebellious misery.

"Well, then," exclaimed the younger Miss McKelvey, seizing her sister's hand, "we'll go up into the attic!"

Bonnie May

And they were gone.

"Oh!" cried Flora hopelessly, "it shows what one criminal act will lead to!"

"There was no criminal act," retorted Baron. "Nothing is really wrong. Have him up!" His tone seemed to say: "Assert your right! I'll back you up!"

He went to the head of the stairway. "Come right up, Addis," he called. He tried to throw a great deal of cordiality into his voice.

Flora's hands went to her temples in a gesture of despair. "You invited him here in mother's absence—you know you did!" she cried.

"I didn't. But I wouldn't care if I had. I'd have done it if I'd had the wit to think of it. Why shouldn't he come?"

"I won't have him come in this way. Until mother—" She slipped from the room without finishing her sentence.

"What do you intend to do?" demanded Baron.

"There's only one thing to do. I think I may be needed elsewhere just now. I'm going up into the attic."

But as she made her escape she glanced down the stairs. Somebody was coming up. There was the stubborn black hair, the ruddy cheeks, and the close-cropped black mustache——

But she was gone.

Mr. Addis mounted the stairs with the determina-

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tion of one who goes more than half-way to meet destiny.

"Come in!" called Baron. "Excuse me for not coming to meet you. You know I've got a bad ankle."

"Yes," said Mr. Addis, whose robust presence somehow had the effect of making all the aspects of the room effeminate and trivial. "You—were expecting me?"

"No—that is," bungled Baron, "we're delighted to have you call."

Addis reflected. "And Miss Baron?" he asked.

"She's up in the attic just now. There are some callers, I believe."

A dull flush mounted to the visitor's forehead. "I'm afraid I made a mistake," he said. He arose, casting a keen glance at Baron.

"You didn't. You didn't make any mistake at all. We won't wait for them to come down. Come, let's follow, if you don't mind."

"Follow—" said Addis.

"We'll go up to the attic."

CHAPTER XXVII

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE ATTIC

WHEN Bonnie May got up into the attic she gave one swift thought to the fact that Mr. Addis would be coming to the house before long, and that she would not be free to receive him. Flora would be surprised to see him; but then, she concluded, Flora ought to think all the more highly of him if she decided that he had come without waiting for an invitation.

Then her mind was diverted from Mr. Addis and his affairs. It was diverted by an impulse which compelled her to put her arms swiftly a Clifton's neck, and Jack's, and express again her joy at seeing them.

"You dear boys!" she exclaimed, "it makes me feel so good—and so bad—to see you again. Oh, those old days!"

They all found chairs, and for a little time Bonnie May leaned forward in hers, her shoulders drooping, her eyes filled with yearning. Then she aroused herself. "Do you remember the time we went to Cheyenne in a sort of coach, and the soldiers made us have dinner—a Christmas dinner—with them?" she asked.

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Clifton remembered. He said: "And you put on a cap that came way down over your eyes, and ran into the fat old captain who had come in 'unbeknownst,' as one of the soldiers said, to inspect the quarters!"

Said Bonnie May: "And the soldiers wanted us to change our play, 'The Captain's Daughter,' so that it would be a military play instead of a sea story!"

There was a moment of silence, and then, for no apparent reason, the child and her visitors joined in a chorus of laughter.

"That old play—I remember every word of the heroine's part!" said Bonnie May. "She wasn't much, was she? I remember wishing I was big enough to have the part instead of her."

She shook her head gently in the ecstasy of recalling the old atmosphere, the old ambitions, the old adventures. Then she clasped her hands and exclaimed: "Let's do an act of it, just for fun! Oh, let's do! If you could only think how hungry I've been——"

She did not wait for an answer. She hurried to Thomason's door and knocked. Her movements expressed a very frenzy of desire—of need. When Thomason did not respond she opened his door, and looked into his room.

"He's not here!" she exclaimed. "Come—his things will make the grandest sailors out of you!" She had them in Thomason's room in no time.

Bonnie May

"But we can't both be sailors," objected Jack.
"We'll need a captain."

"I'll imagine him. He'll be out of sight somewhere." She opened Thomason's trunk.

"It's not—Romeo's, is it?" asked Clifton dubiously.

Bonnie May only emitted a little scream of delight. She had caught sight of two red bandanna handkerchiefs. She had them out swiftly. Also a new canvas coat, and an old one.

Then she heard some one entering the room. Thomason came and stood beside her, to see what she was doing. He looked into the trunk as if he were curious to see what was in it.

Her manner betrayed no confusion at all. "So glad you've come!" she said. "It's going to be a play. Oh, the very thing! You can be one of the sailors, Thomason, and then we can have the captain, too." She appealed to Clifton and Jack. "Won't he make a perfectly splendid sailor?" she demanded.

They agreed that he would be an ideal sailor.

Thomason hadn't the slightest idea what it meant. But when she tied one of the red bandanna handkerchiefs in a special fashion around the neck of one of the actors, he concluded that it was going to be some kind of a game. Or possibly he feared he was going to lose his handkerchiefs.

"Put one on me!" he suggested.

And Bonnie May put one on him.

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Then she happened to look at one of the window-shades. "Earrings!" she exclaimed. "They used to look so delightfully wicked!"

With Clifton's aid she removed several brass rings from the window-shades.

"I won't need them," said Clifton. "You know I was the captain."

So the rings were hung in Jack's ears and Thomason's.

"Splendid!" cried Bonnie May. She inspected the result critically. "If we only had— Thomason, is there any blacking?"

Thomason found a box of blacking in Baron's room.

She dipped her finger into it and drew a series of sinister lines across Jack's unlined face.

Clifton proffered a criticism. "You're putting on too much. He's to be a sailor—not a pirate."

"No, only a sailor. But he ought to look a little frightful." She stood back in admiration of her work.

Thomason had begun more clearly to understand. "Put some on me," he invited.

Clifton, in the meantime, had found a golf cap which had been handed down from Baron to Thomason. It did not make a thoroughly realistic captain of him, but it was the best he could do. He was trying to recall some of the telling phrases in "The Captain's Daughter." He could improvise, if necessary. He looked on seriously while Bonnie

Bonnie May

May put the finishing touches on Thomason's face.

It was then that Mrs. Harrod appeared.

"Oh! I'm sure I'm intruding!" she cried. She looked with profound amazement at every face in the room.

"You're not intruding at all!" declared Bonnie May. "It's to be a play, you know. You can be the audience, if you will."

Mrs. Harrod began to laugh almost helplessly. Then she checked herself, because she perceived that Bonnie May was deeply in earnest.

"Of course!" she responded. "I make a very good audience. I'll be delighted to help."

She took a chair and became, immediately, a highly inspiring audience. Still, she was amazed. She had never been told by any of the Barons that Bonnie May had formerly been "of the profession."

"We'll do only the third act," decided Bonnie May, addressing the two actors, "where the ship sinks, and the raft is seen at sea." She ended by glancing at Mrs. Harrod, who nodded as if she really preferred to witness only the third act.

"We'll need a raft, of course," she said. She glanced about the room. The trunk was not large enough to hold two and contribute to a realistic effect. "It will have to be the bed," she decided. "Thomason, you and Jack will sit on the bed. And you'll have to remember that you're on a

What Happened in the Attic

raft in a storm. The storm is so severe that you nearly fall off the raft."

"Is it?" asked Thomason. He seemed incredulous.

"It will be. Jack will let you know when. You look at him once in a while and do just as he does."

There was an explosion of shrill laughter in the adjoining room, and then the McKelvey girls appeared.

They seemed quite startled and ready to run, even after they saw Mrs. Harrod.

But Mrs. Harrod reassured them. "Come right in," she called cordially. "It's to be a play, and as yet we have a miserably small audience."

They drifted a little farther into the room, wide-eyed.

It was here that Clifton rebelled. "Oh, look here," he protested, "it will look so silly!"

"Just because we have an audience!" retorted Bonnie May blankly. Then, with feeling: "If you've got used to playing to empty seats, it will do you good to have somebody looking at you. Now, do be sensible."

"I shall be awfully disappointed not to see the play—that is, the third act," protested Mrs. Harrod.

"Well, go ahead," said Clifton. But he looked decidedly shamefaced.

Bonnie May took her position in the middle of the room. She meant to explain what it was they

Bonnie May

were about to do. She did not know that Flora had come in and was standing just inside the door, nor did she know that Victor and Mr. Addis also arrived a moment later.

"This is the situation," she began. "I am the daughter of the captain of a sailing vessel. Two of the sailors love me, but they have to keep still about it, because I am so far above them. We're all on the ship, on a voyage, you understand. I love *one* of the sailors, but I'm afraid to admit it for fear my father will be angry. Then one of the sailors speaks to my father—about his love for me, you know. But my father tells him he must never be guilty of such boldness again. Then the two sailors lead a mutiny, in the hope of getting control of the ship. But the mutiny fails, and the two leaders are put in irons.

"I feel so sorry for them that I plan their escape. I know I cannot marry either of them, but I pity them just the same. So I take some of the rest of the crew into my confidence, and they make a raft in secret. Then one night when we are within sight of land I get the other sailors to let them go—the two men who are in irons—and throw them overboard, together with the raft. I mean it all for their own good, though they make the mistake of thinking I wish to have them murdered. Of course, my father isn't allowed to know anything about all this. It's done while he is asleep."

"A likely story!" interpolated Clifton.

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"A very fine situation," amended Bonnie May. "It is arranged that the sailors who have helped me are to tell my father, when he wakes up, that the two prisoners made their escape and were trying to murder him, when they, the other sailors, threw them overboard in a desperate fight.

"Then comes the third act, which we are about to present. A storm comes up and the ship strikes a rock. We are about to sink when the raft drifts into sight. The two sailors who were prisoners are on it. My father urges me to join the sailors on the raft, so that I may be saved. But I know they believe I plotted their murder, and I am as much afraid of them as I am of the sinking ship. The climax comes when the ship sinks and I am thrown into the sea. Of course the two sailors rescue me. Now we will imagine that the curtain has just gone up on the third act."

She turned for an inspection of the "company," and caught sight of Flora, Victor, and Mr. Addis just inside the doorway.

"Don't mind us," said Flora. "We hope we're not interrupting."

But Bonnie May was not to be embarrassed now. She scarcely took pains to answer beyond a swift—"Not at all!" She was earnestly shaping her mood for the work ahead of her.

Her intensity had created a really strange atmosphere. Nothing louder than a whisper could be heard in the room, and even whispering soon ceased.

Bonnie May

"Now, captain—or father—take your place on the bridge, where you belong."

Clifton proceeded with the utmost seriousness to climb up on Thomason's table. He stood at one end, so that there would be room for Bonnie May also.

"The sailors will now take their places on the raft," was the next order. "You know, you're not supposed to be visible until you hear the line, 'the ship is sinking,' and then you want to remember that you are in a violent storm."

Jack and Thomason climbed to the middle of the bed and sat down awkwardly, both looking in the same direction, like rowers in a boat.

"And remember you have paddles in your hands," reminded Bonnie May.

"I have a paddle," responded Jack.

"I ain't," objected Thomason.

"Oh, yes, you have," declared Jack, "one just like mine." He took a stroke with an imaginary paddle, held suitably.

"Well—I have a paddle," conceded Thomason.

Bonnie May then was helped to the "bridge," beside Clifton.

Clifton began. He was not quite sure about the lines, but he recalled the situation clearly enough. "Best go below, my daughter," were the words which filled the room with a ringing effect. "I have not seen a gull since the second watch ended, and they do not hide from ordinary storms. I fear we may be caught in a tempest."

What Happened in the Attic

Bonnie May clasped her hands in a frenzy of earnestness. Her words came with intense eloquence: "Let me stay with you, father. I fear no storm while I am by your side."

Her voice filled the room with tones which were intense, even, resonant, golden.

Mrs. Harrod, regarding her incredulously, put out a hand and touched Flora on the arm. No one else stirred.

There came Clifton's response: "But, child, I tell you Davy Jones's locker fairly gapes in gales like this. I bid you go below."

The response came with even greater intensity: "But tell me first, father: Would a raft live in such a sea as this?"

So the rather silly lines were repeated, back and forth. But they scarcely seemed silly. The two players were putting a tremendous earnestness into them, and the "audience" felt no inclination at all to smile.

The two players came to the point in the story where the ship struck a rock, and their intensity was more than doubled. The raft began its part in the scene, but nobody looked at it for a time.

Clifton was trying to compel Bonnie May to consent to board the raft. He had seized her arm roughly and was threatening her. She screamed her refusal. Then it came time for her to behold the murderous looks on the faces of the two men on the raft.

Bonnie May

"Look at them!" she screamed. "Look Look!" She pointed at the raft, her eyes wide with terror. The "audience" could not refrain from looking at the raft.

Jack and Thomason were wielding their paddles with great vigor. Jack had also begun to lurch from right to left, as a man might do in a storm-tossed raft. Thomason, catching the drift of things was imitating him.

And then, unfortunately, Thomason's bed gave way. With an ear-splitting crash it collapsed, just as Bonnie May screamed: "Look! Look!"

And of course it was at that precise instant that Mrs. Baron came rushing into the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTER THE CURTAIN WAS LOWERED

MRS. BARON had returned from her calling expedition earlier than she had expected to. She had had a feeling that something might go wrong. Pre-science is really a wonderful thing.

Now as the poor lady stood within Thomason's room she was quite terrified. For the moment there had been a dreadful din. And now, looking at Thomason, she caught the rebellious expression in his round, innocent eyes. She saw that he had brass rings in his ears. Unfortunately she did not associate the brass rings with the window blinds. And his face was horribly streaked. His right leg was sticking up in air quite inelegantly, and he was clawing at some other unspeakable person in an effort to regain his equilibrium.

And then there was Bonnie May, with an insane light in her eyes. And behind Bonnie May was a smirking creature who grinned maliciously at Mrs. Baron, as if he and she shared some guilty secret in common. Certainly she did not know the man.

Moreover, there stood Flora, looking unspeakably demure, with the man Addis by her side. Addis was looking as if her arrival had provoked

Bonnie May

him. His look seemed to say: "If you don't like it, why don't you run along?"

Mrs. Baron did not stop to take in any of the others. At first she was speechless, as the saying is, though she was trying to shape certain comments which she meant to direct at Bonnie May.

She opened her mouth once and again quite helplessly. Then she found her voice.

"You little—limb of Satan!" The words came with difficulty. In that instant her features looked quite unlovely. Bonnie May might have told her that elderly people ought never, under any circumstances, to become violently angry. But Bonnie May was in no condition to utter elemental truths.

"You awful little—wretch!" added Mrs. Baron. "No sooner do I turn my back than you disgrace me! You open my door to—the whole street!"

Bonnie May was blinking rapidly. She was very pale. If you dreamed that you were finding large sums of money, and some one threw a bucket of cold water on you, and you woke up to find yourself in the poorhouse—that perhaps fairly describes her mental state.

She had not been quite sorry that the bed collapsed. Some of the secondary cells in her brain had been warning her, as she stood on the "bridge," that the third act could scarcely be made to come to a true climax. She couldn't be projected into the sea really. She would have to step tamely

After the Curtain Was Lowered

down from the table and begin to talk in a commonplace fashion.

Under favorable conditions the collapse of the bed would have been a relief.

But now she stood looking at Mrs. Baron trying to reach her soul through her angry eyes. She shrank so from being humiliated before her friends—the old and the new. If Mrs. Baron, who had been so kind in many unimportant ways and times, could only spare her now!

"If you will permit me, madam—" began Clifton.

"Who are these—gentlemen?" demanded Mrs. Baron, still wrathfully regarding Bonnie May—Bonnie May and no other.

"They are my friends," said Bonnie May. "They have known me always. And really, you know, we weren't doing any thing wrong!"

Clifton had assisted her to the floor; and now, after an appealing step in Mrs. Baron's direction, and the swift conclusion that nothing she could do would save the situation, she broke into tears and staggered from the room.

"Bonnie May!" called Clifton, with overflowing solace in his tone. He ran after Bonnie May. The other actor, casting brass rings and red bandanna to the floor, followed.

"Emily Boone!" The voice was Mrs. Harrod's. "I think you might blame us, if it's all so terrible. We encouraged her. We *enjoyed* it."

Bonnie May

Mrs. Baron now turned toward the assembled group. She seemed dazed. "I—I didn't know you were here!" she said, her voice trembling weakly. And then—"I don't care! What would any woman do, coming home and finding strangers and—and such a scene in her house?"

"We invited them in, mother," confessed Baron weakly.

"Yes," echoed Flora, "they were old companions of Bonnie May's, and we thought it would be nice to invite them in!"

"And I suppose you invited—*him* in, too?" retaliated Mrs. Baron, indicating Addis by a scornful, slight movement of her head.

The effect of this upon Flora was most distressing. Could her mother so far forget herself as to reveal family differences in the presence of Mrs. Harrod and the McKevy girls? Her wounded eyes fairly begged for mercy.

Addis promptly came to her relief.

"No, she didn't, Mrs. Baron. I just dropped in." His voice, by reason of its bigness and calmness, had the effect of making every one in the room feel how petty and needless had been the unpleasantness which Mrs. Baron's arrival had created. His hair seemed more bristling than ever as he added: "If you will permit me, I'll bid you good day." He made a rather stiff bow, which was meant to include every one in the room, and turned to go.

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But here Mrs. Harrod interfered again. "Peter!" she called.

The uttering of the unfamiliar given name created profound surprise in certain minds.

"Peter!" she repeated. "I won't have you go away like that. I want you to know Mrs. Baron better than you seem to know her. She doesn't mean half she says. Emily, tell him I'm right!" She looked commandingly at Mrs. Baron. It was evident that she had a nature which was not to be subdued by trivial mishaps.

Mrs. Baron flinched. "Who is Peter?" she demanded feebly.

"If you don't know, I advise you to cultivate your son's friends. Do you mean that you don't know Peter Addis? Why, he's been like a son of mine. You ought to have known how fond I and the colonel are of him. I'm surprised you've never met him at our house."

"I never did," said Mrs. Baron, swallowing with difficulty.

"Well, for goodness' sake let's go down-stairs—please excuse me for suggesting, Emily, in your house—and behave ourselves. I suppose we've all been at fault—all except that delightful child. I'm going to find her and tell her so!"

"It was so funny!" declared the elder Miss McKelvey, appealing tremulously to Mrs. Baron, and patting her on the arm. She thought of laughing, which was, she believed, the easiest thing to do in all sorts of circumstances.

Bonnie May

Mrs. Harrod's brain was working energetically. She had been reading various faces, and she realized that even yet Mrs. Baron had not spoken to Addis. She drew conclusions. On the way down-stairs she kept Addis close to her.

"Do you know, Peter," she said, in large, cheerful tones. "I think it's downright shabby for you to neglect us as you have been of late. I miss those old evenings so!—when you and the colonel used to come in from hunting, and sit down and eat like two famished boys, and bring the atmosphere of outdoors with you. Do you remember how the dogs used to slip into the house, in spite of the colonel's scolding, and put their heads on your knees while you ate supper? Those were the occasions that made a home worth having."

Addis, entirely satisfied with the turn affairs were taking, responded eagerly: "I certainly do remember. I've often wondered if the colonel had Queenie yet. There was a dog for you!"

"Oh, no! Queenie's been dead over a year. It's Prince and Hector, now—Queenie's puppies. The colonel says they're every bit as smart as their mother was. I wish you'd come out soon. On a Sunday, if you'd rather find us alone. We'll sit out under the grape-arbor. You know the grapes are just getting ripe. Those little vines have grown up beautifully. The colonel always has his bottle of what-do-you-call-it out there, and his pipe, and I send the servants away and prepare a little lunch——"

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They were in the sitting-room now, too eagerly engaged in their conversation to think of sitting down, and Mrs. Baron was waiting humbly to regain control of the situation.

Mrs. Harrod was not unmindful of her old friend's discomfort; but she had an idea she was engaged in giving a patient a dose of medicine, and that she ought to be careful that none of it was spilled.

"If you'll excuse me," said Mrs. Baron, now thoroughly dejected, "I'll look for Bonnie May. I think I ought to have a talk with her."

She had heard every word that Mrs. Harrod had spoken to Mr. Addis. And she had heard enough.

She went to Bonnie May's room. She was too confused to realize that Flora accompanied her. But as she stood staring miserably into the empty room she heard Flora's comforting voice.

"She's probably down-stairs, mother, with— with her friends."

Flora went to the stairway and called. There was no response. She listened, anxiously turning her eyes toward her mother; but there was no sound of voices on the floor below.

"They wouldn't have remained in the house a minute," declared Mrs. Baron, who was now frankly remorseful.

"But Bonnie May—she may have gone back to talk to Mrs. Shepard," suggested Flora. They could hear Mrs. Harrod's voice, pleasantly masterful. She had introduced Addis to the McKelvey

Bonnie May

girls, now that she happened to think of it, and they were slipping eager gusts of laughter and disconnected phrases into the conversation.

Mrs. Baron and Flora went down-stairs and appealed to Mrs. Shepard.

Bonnie May had gone out, Mrs. Shepard said. She had come down-stairs and telephoned something in great haste, and then she had induced her two gentleman friends to go away. An automobile had come quite promptly, and she had gone away in it.

Mrs. Baron turned away from her daughter and rested her hand against the wall at the foot of the staircase. Her attitude spelled repentance and fear.

She went up into the child's room, and Flora followed close enough to hear a low, tremulous cry of despair.

"I wouldn't, mother!" soothed Flora, whose eager voice brought Mrs. Harrod and the others.

Mrs. Baron was standing beside a little work-table and a chair that were Bonnie May's. Her face was quivering. "I'm a disagreeable old creature," she declared. "I don't deserve to have any happiness."

One hand fumbled with a handkerchief, which she lifted to her eyes. From the other, slowly relaxing, a handful of roses and ridiculous little silk butterflies fluttered slowly to the floor.

"I want you all to leave me—please!" she begged. "I'm not fit to be seen." She put forth a

After the Curtain Was Lowered

hand to Mrs. Harrod. "Do come back again soon," she begged. "And you, too," she added, extending her hand to the McKelvey girls. And then, as she dabbed her discolored eyes, she concluded with—"And you, too!" She glanced aside, but her hand went out to Addis.

Then she disappeared into her own room, and softly closed the door.

Flora's eyes were shining as she escorted the party down-stairs. "She's only gone to visit friends," she declared. "She'll be back."

The McKelvey girls burst from the front door ahead of the others. They were cheerful creatures who were not to be depressed long by the scenes they had just witnessed.

Flora, standing in the hall to let the others pass, heard them shrieking joyously: "Oh, what a lovely new car you've got, Mrs. Harrod," and then she heard Mrs. Harrod explaining, as she emerged into the sunlight: "A birthday present from the colonel."

They had all passed out now except Addis, and when Flora opened the door a little wider for him he stood still an instant and looked out. The others were out there inspecting Mrs. Harrod's new car.

Then he took Flora's hand in his and closed the door firmly and securely.

It was fully a minute before the door was opened again, and Addis descended the steps alone.

Mrs. Harrod and the McKelvey girls forgot the new machine immediately. They were all looking

Bonnie May

at Peter Addis. And they were all thinking precisely the same thing, namely, that they had never in all their lives seen a man who looked more extraordinarily handsome and happy.

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CHAPTER XXIX

THE MANSION IN SHADOW

WHEN Bonnie May did not return to the mansion that night the fact was not commented upon by any member of the family. It was not quite remarkable that she should spend the night with the Thornburgs. That was where she had gone, of course.

It is true that Mrs. Baron was decidedly uncomfortable. The rupture that had occurred was more serious than any that had preceded it. Possibly she had gone too far. There was the possibility that Bonnie May might nurse a very proper grievance and decide that it was pleasanter to live with the Thornburgs than to continue her residence at the mansion.

In brief, she might refuse to come back. That was Mrs. Baron's fear. It was a fear which hurt the more because she was unwilling to speak of it.

However, when the next day passed and night came, Baron took no trouble to conceal his anxiety—for still Bonnie May had not returned.

He called up the Thornburgs by telephone. Was Bonnie May there? He asked the question very affably. Yes, came back the reply—in an

Bonnie May

equally affable tone—she was there. Would he like to speak to her?

No, she need not be troubled; he merely wished to be sure she was there.

Baron believed, without expressing his belief to any one, that it would be a mistake to manifest anxiety about the late guest—or probably the temporarily absent guest. So it came about that one day followed another, and Bonnie May did not come back, and the several members of the family pretended that nothing was specially wrong.

It was Mrs. Baron who first thrust aside a wholly transparent pretense.

“That’s the trouble with that Thornburg arrangement,” she said at dinner one day, apropos of nothing that had been said, but rather of what everybody was thinking. “I don’t blame her for being offended; but if the Thornburgs were not making efforts to keep her she’d have been back before now. On the whole, we were really very good to her.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t worry,” declared Baron briskly. “She’ll be back. If she doesn’t come before long I’ll go over there and—and tole her back.”

A second week passed—and she had not returned. And now her absence was making a distinct difference in the mansion. The dinner and sitting-room conversations became listless; or during the course of them a tendency toward irritability was developed.

The Mansion in Shadow

One day Mrs. Baron sought her son alone in his attic. Said she: "Do you suppose she's not coming back at *all*?" She looked quite wan and bereft as she asked the question.

Baron felt remorseful. "Of course she is," he assured her. "I'm going over to the Thornburgs'. I'm going to see about it."

Bonnie May was acting foolishly, he thought. The Thornburgs were not keeping faith. Yet it was a difficult matter for him to make a clear case against either Bonnie May or the Thornburgs, and he was by no means comforted by a little event which transpired one morning.

He encountered the two actors as he was leaving the mansion, and his impulse was to speak to them cordially. But in returning his greeting they manifested a well-simulated faint surprise, as if they felt sure Baron had made a mistake. They nodded politely and vaguely and passed on.

In his mind Baron charged them angrily with being miserable cads, and he was the more angry because they had snubbed him in such an irreproachable fashion.

Even Baron, Sr., became impatient over the long absence of Bonnie May. Realizing that his usual practise of watching and listening was not to be effective in the present instance, he leaned back in his chair at dinner one evening and asked blandly: "What's become of the little girl?"

And Mrs. Baron made a flat failure of her effort

Bonnie May

to be indifferent. Her hand trembled as she adjusted her knife and fork on her plate. "Why, I don't know," said she. "You know, she has two homes." But she was afraid to attempt to look anywhere but at her plate.

Baron was astounded by the utter dejection which his mother tried to conceal. Why, she loved the child—really. She was grieving for her.

And that evening he emerged from the house with much grimness of manner and made for the Thornburgs'.

The dusk had fallen when he reached the quiet street on which the manager lived. Street-lamps cast their light among the trees at intervals. In the distance a group of children were playing on the pavement. Before the Thornburg home silence reigned, and no one was visible.

Yet as Baron neared the approach to the house he paused abruptly. He had been mistaken in believing there was no one near. In the heavy shadow of a maple-tree some one was standing—a woman. She was gazing at the lower windows of the Thornburg residence. And there was something in her bearing which seemed covert, surreptitious.

He, too, looked toward those windows. There was nothing there beyond a frankly cheerful interior. He could see no one.

What was the woman looking at? He glanced at her again, and a bough, swaying in the breeze, moved from its place so that the rays from a near-

The Mansion in Shadow

by lamp shone upon the figure which appeared to be standing on guard.

She was overdressed, Baron thought. Under an immense velvet hat weighted down with plumes masses of blond hair were visible. Her high, prominent cheek-bones were not at all in keeping with the girlish bloom which had been imparted to her cheeks by a too obvious artifice. She had caught up her skirt lightly in one hand, as if the attitude were habitual, and one aggressively elegant shoe was visible.

He had paused only momentarily. Now he proceeded on his way, passing the woman in the shadow with only half the width of the sidewalk between her and him.

He had recognized her. She was the woman who had stood in the theatre that night talking to Thornburg—who had visited Thornburg in his office. Could she be Miss Barry? Baron wondered.

A maid let him into the house and drew open a sliding door, revealing the lighted but empty drawing-room. She took his card and disappeared.

He sat for a time, counting the heavy minutes and listening intently for sounds which did not reach him. Then the manager and his wife entered the room, both bending upon him strangely expectant glances.

Baron arose. "I've taken the liberty—" he began, but Thornburg instantly swept all formalities aside.

Bonnie May

"That's all right," he said. "Keep your seat." Then, obviously, they waited for something which they expected he had come to say.

But he was listening for the sound of Bonnie May's voice. He seemed almost absent-minded to the man and woman who were intently regarding him.

Then Thornburg, plainly afraid of offending his guest by a too impulsive or impatient word, fell back upon commonplaces. He concluded that he must wait to hear what Baron had come to say.

"You've heard about Baggot's good luck?" he asked.

"I think not," replied Baron, not at all cordially.

"His play. They're getting ready to put it on in Chicago. His people have a theatre there that's not engaged just now. There's to be an elegant production—first-class people and everything. Baggot's gone on to look after the rehearsals. We ought to have it here by the first of the year—or earlier, if a number two company is organized."

"I hadn't heard," said Baron. "I haven't seen Baggot lately." With intention he spoke listlessly. Thornburg wasn't coming to the point, and he didn't intend to be played like a fish.

An uncomfortable silence fell again, and again Baron found himself listening intently.

And then he could bear the suspense no longer. He leaned toward Thornburg with animation. "Look here, Thornburg," he said, "I don't believe you're playing fair!"

The Mansion in Shadow

"You might explain that," responded the manager curtly.

"You know what the agreement was. I don't believe she'd stay away like this unless she'd been restrained."

Thornburg's only response was a perplexed frown. It was Mrs. Thornburg who first took in the situation. She arose, painfully agitated, and faced Baron. "Do you mean that she isn't at your house?" she demanded. Her voice trailed away to a whisper, for already she read the answer in his eyes.

Baron sank back in his chair. "She hasn't been for weeks," he replied.

Thornburg sprang to his feet so energetically that the caller followed his example. "I thought it was you who wasn't playing fair," he said. And then he stared, amazed at the change in Baron's manner.

The younger man was rushing from the room. There had come to him unbidden the picture of the two actors who had snubbed him in front of his house—a recollection of their studied aloofness, their cold, skilful avoidance of an encounter with him. They had taken her!

But at the door he paused. "But I telephoned to you," he said, remembering. "You told me she was here."

"She was here the day you telephoned. She went away the next day."

Baron frowned. "She went away—where?"

Bonnie May

"She went in the machine. Of course we supposed——"

Thornburg hurried to the telephone and was speaking to his chauffeur, in a moment. "Oliver? Come to the house a moment, Oliver—and hurry."

He replaced the receiver and hurried back to meet the chauffeur.

The soldierly appearing young chauffeur was standing at attention before them in a moment.

"We want to know if you can remember where you took Bonnie May the last time she left the house."

"Perfectly, sir. She asked me to stop at the Palace Theatre. She said she was expecting to meet a friend there. And she told me I was not to wait—that she wouldn't need the car again that afternoon."

Fifteen minutes later Baron was ringing the bell of the house next to the mansion. He couldn't recall the two actors' names, but he described them. He wished to see them on urgent business.

But they had paid their bill and gone away. The woman who met Baron at the door was sure they had said something about finishing their engagement at the Folly and about leaving the city.

As Baron turned away from the door it seemed to him that the street had suddenly gone empty—that the whole world was a haunted wilderness.

CHAPTER XXX

"THE BREAK OF DAY"

"MR. VICTOR BARON, please."

An usher with an absurdly severe uniform and a frankly cherubic countenance had pushed aside the hangings and stood looking into the Baron box in the Barrymore Theatre.

It was the night of the first performance of Baggot's play, "The Break of Day," in Thornburg's theatre, and the Barons were all present—by special and urgent invitation.

Baron had been studying the aisles full of people, eagerly seeking their seats, and listening to the continuous murmur which arose all over the house. But when he heard his name called he arose and slipped out into the shadows.

"Mr. Thornburg sends his compliments and asks if you'll be good enough to visit him in his office for a few minutes." Thus the cherubic usher.

The Barrymore office was off from the lobby, but it commanded a view not only of the street but also of the procession of men and women who passed the ticket-office.

Thornburg had left the door open, and Baron, approaching, caught sight first of a considerable

Bonnie May

expanse of dazzling white shirt-front and then of the manager's ruddy, smiling countenance. Evidences of prosperity were all about. A procession of motor-cars continued to stop before the theatre to deposit passengers. Throughout the lobby there was the shimmer of costly fabrics worn by women, the flashing of jewels, the rising and falling of gusts of laughter and a chaos of happy speech. And everywhere there was the glitter of onyx panels and pillars, and the warmth of hooded lights, and the indefinable odor of fine raiment and many delicate perfumes.

Thornburg seized Baron's hand and shoved the door to with his foot. Happiness radiated from him. "I've a secret to tell you," he began. "I want you to be one of the first to know."

"Let's have it!" responded Baron, trying to reflect a little of the manager's gayety.

"You'll remember my telling you that I had a little daughter by my first wife?"

"I remember."

"I've found her again!"

"Ah, that's fine!"

"And that isn't all. You're going to see her to-night."

Baron waited.

"She's the girl they've been making all that fuss about in Chicago—who's been known only as 'The Sprite.' She's got the leading part in 'The Break of Day.'"

"The Break of Day"

Baron felt his way cautiously. He couldn't mar such superb complacency, such complete happiness. "And Mrs. Thornburg—" he began haltingly.

"God bless her, it's all right with her. She knows, and she's as happy as I am."

Baron shrunk back with a sense of utter loss. "Thornburg," he said, "I want you to tell me—is the little girl the daughter of—of Miss Barry?"

The manager clapped a heavy hand on Baron's shoulder. "No," he responded. And after a moment's almost pensive reflection he regained his buoyant manner and resumed. "I'd like you to meet her. Between acts, or after the play. You and your family. She's young. I think a little attention, especially motherly attention, will mean a lot to her just now. Of course she mustn't be worried to-night; but suppose we make up a little party, after the performance, and make her feel that she's got friends here?"

Baron couldn't think of refusing. "I'll have time to pay my respects, at least," he agreed. "And I'll put the case before my mother and the others, just as you have stated it. I think perhaps she'll consent."

"That's a good fellow. I'll be looking for you," concluded Thornburg, and then he joyously shoved Baron out of the office.

The footlights were being turned on and the asbestos curtain lifted as Baron returned to his

Bonnie May

seat. Then the orchestra began to play, and under cover of the music Thornburg's secret and his invitation were passed on to Mrs. Baron and to the others in the box.

Baron did not catch his mother's response, and she did not repeat it. She had turned to listen to the music. For the moment the orchestra was commanding a good deal of attention. A cycle of popular melodies was being played, and under the spell of the singing violins the outside world was being made to recede into the distance, while the mimic world became real.

Men and women forgot that out on the winter streets, only a few yards from them, there was passing that disinterested throng which always passes the door of every theatre; the eager, the listless, the hopeful, the discouraged, and that sprinkling of derelicts who have no present drama at all, but who are bearing inevitably on toward the final tragedy.

The orchestra completed the popular melodies; and after a brief interval the leader rapped his music-rack with his baton to enjoin attention. Then he lifted his hand as if in benediction over a player to his left, and a wood-wind instrument announced a new theme—penetratingly, arrestingly. Then the strains of "The Ride of the Valkyries," with their strident and compelling quality, filled the theatre.

Baron was startled by the touch of a hand on

“The Break of Day”

his shoulder. Baggot was leaning toward him. “That’s to create the right atmosphere,” he whispered, nodding toward the orchestra. “It’s to put the idea of the supernatural into everybody’s mind, you know.” He withdrew then.

Baron thought that was just like Baggot—to be explaining and asserting himself, as if he were doing it all. He was glad to be rid of him. He wanted to feel, not to think. Then he realized that the musicians had laid aside their instruments and that the curtain was being slowly lifted.

Applause greeted the setting. The stage represented the heart of a forest in midsummer—“the heart of the summer storms.” There was a shadowy dell, shut in by a wilderness. One giant tree in the foreground rose to invisible heights. At the back a little stream trickled down over a mossy bank, and during its course it formed a silent pool in one silent place, and before this a Psyche innocently regarded her face in the mirror of water.

Then the foliage of the big tree began to be agitated by a rising storm, and the leaves shook as if they were being beaten by descending drops.

For a moment the summer-shower effect continued. Then from the highest point on the stage visible to the audience a character in the drama appeared—the Sprite. She sprang from some unseen point to the limb of the ancient tree. The limb gave gently, and she sprang to the next limb below. The secure platforms making this form of

Bonnie May

descent possible were hidden from the audience by heavy foliage. The descent continued until the fairy figure sprang lightly to the stage.

She was clad in a costume of leaves, the prevailing color of which was a deep green, rising to natural tints of yellow. She wore a hood which was cunningly fashioned from one big leaf, around which an automobile veil of the gauziest texture was wound so that it concealed her face.

She began unwinding this veil as she spoke her first lines.

"Back again where the storms are!" she was saying: "Ah, it is good, after that dreadful calm."

Baron realized that his mother had lifted her hands to her bosom as if to stifle a cry. For himself, a thrill shot through his body, and then he leaned forward, rigid, amazed.

For when the Sprite had removed the last fold of her veil and faced the audience he beheld again, after long waiting and vain search, the lost guest, Bonnie May.

She wore her hair in a little golden knot at the crown of her head; the waist-line of her dress was just below her arms, and a pair of tiny golden sandals adorned her feet. When she would have lain the veil aside a screen of leaves parted and a Titan sprang to her side to render service.

And so the play began.

But for the moment Baron could not think about the play. He was thinking of Baggot—Baggot,

“The Break of Day”

who had known all the time. Then again he felt a touch on his arm and, turning, he found himself looking into the playwright's eyes; and he could perceive only the delight of a childish creature, jubilant because he had achieved an innocent surprise.

He tried to respond with a smile—and could not. But little by little the play caught his attention. The impression grew upon him that “The Break of Day” was a play of that indefinable quality which goes unfailingly to the heart. But more—he realized that Bonnie May was carrying her audience with her with the ease and certainty of an artist. She ceased to be on trial almost immediately, and those who watched her began to feel rather than to think, to accept rather than to judge.

When the first intermission came Baron slipped out of the box and went in search of Baggot, whom he found standing apart in the foyer.

“I don't have to tell you I'm glad,” he began; and then, with furrowed brow, he added, “but surely . . .”

Baggot read his thought accurately. “I wanted to give you the surprise of your life! You can't help being pleased?”

“Pleased! Certainly! But we've been distressed about her.”

“Oh—distressed! Well, she belongs to the theatre. She always has. *I* saw that right away!”

Bonnie May

"But if we'd only known! I don't suppose we could have stood in the way."

"But it was her idea—at first. She didn't want you to know. I mean when we put the piece on here for a try-out—at first."

"You don't mean——"

"Of course! It was when you were laid up. I thought she'd lay down on me, because you wouldn't see her that night. And then came the Chicago engagement. I took my mother along to look after her. I didn't know she hadn't told you anything for a time, and then I left it to her to do what she wanted to do. It was always her idea to take you by surprise. I think she cared more for that than for anything else. Great goodness, man, you don't imagine *you've* been treated badly?"

Baron's glance became inscrutable.

"Why, just think of it!" Baggot went on. "She's drawing the salary of a regular star. And her reputation is made."

Baron turned away almost curtly. What was to be gained by discussing Bonnie May with a creature who could only think of salary and reputation—to whom she was merely a puppet, skilled in repeating lines of some one else's fashioning?

He entered Thornburg's office. His manner was decidedly lugubrious.

The manager held out his hand expansively. "You've come to congratulate me," he said. And then he took in Baron's mood.

“The Break of Day”

“Oh, I see!” he went on. “There’s something that needs explaining. I played fair with you all right, Baron. You see, I was in the dark myself, in some ways.”

He took occasion to light a cigar, which he puffed at absent-mindedly. “Just before Bonnie May showed up here—when you got hold of her—I learned that her mother had died. It had been kept from me. You see, I was sending the mother money. And when the little one was only a year or so old I got a letter from her mother offering to give her up to me. I’ve told you what happened then. I—I couldn’t take her. Then I got another letter from the mother saying she was turning Bonnie May over to her sister for the time being, and that I was to send the remittances to her. That was Miss Barry.

“I believed the arrangement was only temporary. I didn’t understand it, of course. But when several years went by I began to suspect that something was wrong. I didn’t like Miss Barry. She was never the woman her sister was. She was—well, the brazen sort of woman. I wasn’t willing to leave the little daughter with her any longer. I wrote to her and told her she might send Bonnie May to me, if she cared to, but that there weren’t to be any more remittances. I thought that would fetch her. I meant to put the little daughter in a home or a school somewhere. And then they blew in here, and you got her—and your getting her was just the thing I wanted.”

Bonnie May

An incandescent light on the manager's desk winked once and again. "The curtain's going up," he informed Baron, and the latter hurried back to his seat.

As he entered the box a flood of cold air from the stage swept over the audience. And when his mother shivered slightly he observed that Peter Addis, sitting immediately behind her, quietly leaned forward and lifted a quilted satin wrap from a chair, placing it deftly about her shoulders.

She yielded with a nestling movement and with a backward flash of grateful recognition which told a story of their own.

The audience was stilled again as the second setting was revealed—"the home of the autumn leaves." Here was a masterpiece of designing and painting, Baron realized. A house was being constructed for the Sprite. Much disputation arose. The sort of talk which precedes the planning of a home was heard—save that the terms were grotesquely altered. Then the action was complicated by the arrival of a band of vikings, driven ashore by a gale.

And then Baron, too, forgot that Bonnie May was a human being, as Baggot seemed to have done, and was lost in the ingenious whimsicality of the play.

It was after the third act—in which there was a picture of cruel winter, with all the characters in

“The Break of Day”

the play combating a common foe in the form of the withering cold—that the Sprite won the heartiest approval.

Thunders of applause swept over the house; and when the effect of thunder had passed there was a steady demonstration resembling the heavy fall of rain. Again and again Bonnie May bowed as the curtain was lifted and lowered, and again and again the applause took on new vigor and earnestness. And then she stepped a little forward and nodded lightly toward some one back in the wings, and the curtain remained up.

She made a little speech. It seemed she had a special voice for that, too. It was lower, but elaborately distinct. The very unconventionality of it afforded a different kind of delight. Her manner was one of mild disparagement of an inartistic custom. She bowed herself from the stage with infinite graciousness.

She was a tremendous success.

It was only after the curtain went down for the last time that Thornburg appeared at the Baron box. The scene had been called “Spring—and the Fairies,” and it had put the pleasantest of thoughts into the minds of the audience, which was now noisily dispersing.

“I hope you’re all coming back on the stage for a minute,” said the manager.

He was dismayed by Mrs. Baron’s impetuosity. She was too eager to remain an instant talking to

Bonnie May

any one. She could scarcely wait to be escorted back to the stage—and yet she had no idea how to reach that unknown territory undirected. Her bearing was really quite pathetic.

And in a moment the entire party had passed through a doorway quite close to the box, and were casting about in that region where the wings touch the dressing-rooms. The players were hurrying to and fro, and one man, carrying a large waxen nose and a pair of enormous ears—he had been a gnome in the play—paused and looked curiously at the very circumspect intruders.

Somehow it did not seem at all remarkable to Baron, as it might have done, that he presently found himself confronting Miss Barry. It was plain that she had been waiting to enter the child's dressing-room, and at the approach of Thornburg she brightened—rather by intention, perhaps, than spontaneously.

“Oh, how fortunate!” she began. “You’ll be able to help me, of course. I want to see the new star! I’d lost track of her.” Her practised smile and shifting eyes played upon Thornburg menacingly, inquiringly, appealingly. “I want to begin planning for her again. When her engagement here is over I mean to take her with me to the coast. She’s reached an age now when I can be of real help to her. Isn’t it wonderful—the way she has developed?”

Thornburg had paused to hear her to the end.

"The Break of Day"

He realized that there was a pitiful lack of assurance—of conviction—in her manner.

When she had finished he smiled tolerantly, yet with unmistakable significance. "No, Miss Barry," he said, replying to her thought rather than her words. "That's all ended now. When Bonnie May has finished her work here I shall see that she has a home in her father's house."

The party moved into the dressing-room, where Bonnie May had been robbed of her fairy trappings and put into a modest frock. Her hair, released from its little knot, was falling about her shoulders and was being combed by a maid.

But she escaped from the maid—and for the moment from all the life which the dressing-room implied—when she saw Mrs. Baron standing in her doorway.

She had put her arms about the trembling old lady's neck, and for the moment they were both silent. And then Mrs. Baron drew back and stood a moment, her hands framing Bonnie May's face.

"You do forget that I was a disagreeable old woman!" she murmured.

"Oh, that!" came the warm response; "you know you forget just little slips when you are happy in your work. And I couldn't have remembered such a little thing anyway, when you'd been so lovely to me!"

She took Mrs. Baron's hand in both her own and clung to it, and lifted it to her face and laid

Bonnie May

her cheek against it. "If you only knew how I've thought of you—of all of you—and longed for you! And how much I wanted you to see me at work, so you would—would *know* me better! You know just talking doesn't prove anything. I wanted so much to have you know that I was an—an artist!"

In the theatre the orchestra was still playing while the people filed out. In the distance there was the muffled sound of the procession of motor-cars starting and of announcers shouting numbers above the din.

It was Flora's turn to press forward and take her seat beside Bonnie May now; and while Mrs. Baron stood aside, smiling quite happily, the manager spoke to her as if he were merely continuing a conversation which had been interrupted.

"Yes, I'm particularly anxious to have you go on with—with the lessons, you know. Not just the books and music, you understand, but—well, say a general influence. You know, she's tremendously fond of all of you. I mean to get her off the stage as soon as the run here is finished. It's time for her to have a little real life. And I'd like things to go on about as they were—I mean, having her in your house, or mine, just as she feels about it. You were the first to give her a mother's attention. I'd be grateful if you felt you could go on with that."

Mrs. Baron tried to answer this quite punctiliously, but she had to turn aside to hide her eyes,

“The Break of Day”

and when she spoke her words were a surprise to her.

“I think you’re a good man,” she said. And she did not trust herself to say anything more. She was gazing at Bonnie May again, and noticing how the strange little creature was clinging to Flora’s hand with both her own, and telling—with her eyes illustrating the story gloriously—of the great events which had transpired since that day when the mansion went back to its normal condition of loneliness and silence.

Baron was observing her, too. He had found a chair quite outside the centre of the picture, and he was trying to assume the pose of a casual on-looker.

But Bonnie May’s eyes met his after a time and something of the radiance passed from her face. She turned away from Flora and stood apart a little and clasped her hands up nearly beneath her chin, and her whole being seemed suddenly tremulous. She was thinking of the home that had been made for her, and of how it was Baron who had opened its door. The others had been lovely, but the ready faith and the willingness to stand the brunt—these had been his.

She moved forward almost shyly until she stood before him, and then her hands went out to him.

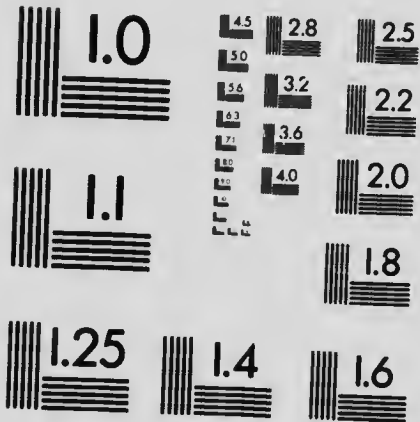
“I must offer my congratulations, too!” he said.

But she ignored that. “Do you remember a time when we talked together about some words



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Bonnie May

that we thought were beautiful—up in the attic?” she asked.

“And you told me you didn’t think much of ‘aunt’ or ‘uncle,’ but that you liked ‘father’ and——”

“Yes, that was the time.”

“I remember perfectly.”

“You know, there’s another word I’ve thought of since then that I’ve wished I could—could have for my own.”

He seemed to be casting about for that other word.

“It’s a lovely word, too. . . .” She drew closer to him. “Help me!” she pleaded, and when he looked into her eyes, a bit startled, she whispered—“Brother . . . brother!” Her hand was on his shoulder, and then it slipped its way to his neck.

“Ah, that *is* a good word!” said Baron. And then the tempest of affection broke, and she had her arms about his neck.

He had no idea she was so strong. She was choking him a bit. But no, it wasn’t really the strength of her arms, after all, he realized.

And then, because his mother and Flora were watching, and because—well, because he was Baron, he straightened up and got possession of her hands again. He patted them lightly.

“It is a good word,” he repeated. “It’s one that has come to have a much bigger meaning for me since I knew you.”

“The Break of Day”

“And you won't think it's got anything to do with that silly old joke . . . ?”

He was really perplexed.

“You know, when they say: ‘I'll be a sister to you!’” She was bubbling over with the old merriment now. “Just to make you keep at a distance, you know.”

“Oh—no, I'll be sure it hasn't anything to do with that.”

He regarded her almost dreamily as she turned again to his mother and Flora. He was thinking of the amazing buoyancy, of the disconcerting, almost estranging humor which lay always just beneath the surface; of her fine courage; of the ineradicable instinct which made everything a sort of play. They would be hers always. Or would there come a time when she would lose them? He wondered.

“There is our number!” interrupted Peter Addis, who had been listening to the voice of the announcers. He had brought the party to the theatre in his own car.

There was a reluctant movement toward the theatre.

“. . . Oh, a matinée performance now and then, if she likes,” Thornburg was explaining to Baron. “But for a few years, at least, that will be all. She's going to have the things she's had to go without all her life.”

They followed the line of the wall around toward

Bonnie May

the front exit. The orchestra had quit playing. The time had come to extinguish the lights.

Eut after the others had gone Baron stood a moment alone. He looked thoughtfully toward the upper right-hand box.

“I thought she was lost that day,” he mused. “I thought I was rescuing her. And now I know she wasn’t really lost then. Not until afterward. And now she has found her home again.”

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